

The Importance of Early Arabic Language Learning in the Early Childhood Education Curriculum

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ABSTRACT This study aims to examine the significance of integrating Arabic language learning into the early childhood education (ECE) curriculum. Arabic, as the language of the Qur'an, plays a crucial role in understanding Islamic teachings and shaping Muslim identity. This research emphasizes the cognitive benefits gained from learning a foreign language at an early age, such as improved memory, problem-solving skills, and cognitive flexibility. Effective teaching methods, including game-based learning, the use of visual media, and communicative approaches, can stimulate children's interest in Arabic. The integration of Islamic values into Arabic language learning is also an essential factor in developing good character and moral values in children. Therefore, this study concludes that introducing Arabic language learning from an early age provides a strong foundation for understanding religion, strengthening Muslim identity, improving communication skills, and preparing children for further education. This qualitative study with a case study design was conducted at PIAUD Dusun Meling, Jetak Village, involving two early childhood teachers and 15 children aged 4–5 years. Data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation over approximately two months. The findings indicate that the teacher's role as a play-scenario designer, interaction facilitator, provider of positive feedback, and motivator is crucial. Role-playing methods were found to improve children's ability to pronounce basic Arabic vocabulary, construct simple sentences, and communicate in real-life situations. The study highlights the importance of optimizing the teacher's role in role-play methods to enhance Arabic speaking skills among early childhood learners. The implications emphasize the need for social-emotional learning that promotes collaboration, empathy, and self-regulation from an early age to foster positive peer relationships.

KEYWORDS: *Arabic Language Learning, Early Childhood, ECE Curriculum, Language Development, Language Education.*

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INTRODUCTION

Arabic, as a sacred language in Islam, holds a central position in understanding and internalizing religious teachings. The Qur'an, as the primary source of Islamic guidance, was revealed in Arabic; therefore, mastery of this language provides direct access to foundational religious texts and meanings. For Muslim communities, including Indonesia as the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, Arabic is not merely a foreign language but also a language of faith, worship, and identity. Introducing Arabic from an early age thus becomes a strategic educational step in shaping morally grounded, intellectually capable, and religiously aware generations. Early exposure allows children to become familiar with Qur'anic vocabulary, daily prayers, and basic Islamic expressions, fostering both linguistic competence and spiritual attachment (Kurniadi, 2024; Khumaini, 2022).

From an educational perspective, integrating Arabic into Early Childhood Education (ECE) aligns with broader theories of early language acquisition and holistic child development. Neuroscientific research confirms that early childhood (0–6 years) represents a “sensitive period” or “golden age” in which the brain demonstrates heightened plasticity and adaptability (Center on the Developing Child, 2016). During this phase, neural connections develop rapidly, enabling children to absorb linguistic input more efficiently than at later stages. Language exposure during this critical period strengthens neural pathways associated with phonological processing, memory retention, and cognitive flexibility. Consequently, introducing Arabic in early childhood education does not merely serve religious purposes but also supports cognitive development more broadly.

Empirical studies indicate that early bilingual or foreign language exposure enhances working memory, attentional control, and metalinguistic awareness (Bialystok, 2017; Li, Legault, & Litcofsky, 2014). Although many studies examine global languages such as English or Mandarin, the cognitive mechanisms underlying foreign language acquisition apply similarly to Arabic. When children learn Arabic vocabulary, distinguish unfamiliar phonemes (such as emphatic consonants), and construct simple sentence structures, they engage executive function skills that support broader academic readiness. These include inhibitory control (distinguishing between first and second language systems), cognitive flexibility (switching between languages), and sustained attention (Barac & Bialystok, 2016).

Furthermore, early Arabic exposure strengthens phonological awareness an essential foundation for literacy development. Arabic possesses unique phonetic and morphological characteristics, including root-pattern morphology and distinct articulation points (makhārij al-urūf). Introducing these features early enhances children's auditory discrimination skills and articulation accuracy. According to Aprilia, Hafiza, and Sholihah (2024), fun-based Arabic learning methods in early childhood settings significantly improve vocabulary retention and pronunciation accuracy. When supported by visual media, songs, and storytelling, children demonstrate greater engagement and long-term recall.

Beyond cognitive benefits, early Arabic learning contributes significantly to identity formation and character education. Language plays a crucial role in shaping cultural and religious identity. In Islamic educational philosophy, Arabic functions not only as a communication tool but also as a medium for transmitting values, ethics, and worldview (Khumaini, 2022). When children learn simple expressions such as greetings (assalāmu‘alaikum), gratitude (alhamdulillah), and supplication phrases, they internalize moral and spiritual concepts embedded in daily language use. This integration supports socio-emotional development and fosters a sense of belonging within the Muslim community (Nurhayati, 2023).

However, despite its importance, the implementation of Arabic learning in Indonesian ECE institutions faces structural and pedagogical challenges. First, the national early childhood curriculum does not consistently position Arabic as a core component. While religious education is included, systematic Arabic language instruction is often limited to memorization of short prayers without communicative competence development. According to Izzati (2023), many early childhood institutions lack structured Arabic learning frameworks aligned with developmental

stages. This results in fragmented instruction that does not fully optimize children's linguistic potential.

Second, teacher competence remains a critical issue. Effective early language instruction requires not only linguistic proficiency but also pedagogical expertise tailored to young learners. Teachers must understand child-centered approaches, play-based learning strategies, and age-appropriate scaffolding techniques. Sudirman (2024) emphasizes that role-play and interactive play significantly enhance children's speaking skills in foreign language contexts. However, many educators lack access to continuous professional development programs focused on Arabic pedagogy for early childhood.

Third, the availability of engaging and developmentally appropriate learning media is still limited. Young children learn best through multisensory experiences involving visual, auditory, and kinesthetic elements. Flashcards, puppets, songs, thematic storytelling, and digital applications can transform Arabic lessons into meaningful experiences. Research shows that fun-based and play-oriented approaches increase motivation and reduce anxiety in early foreign language learning (Aprilia *et al.*, 2024; Siregar, 2018). Without such interactive strategies, Arabic instruction risks becoming rote memorization rather than communicative engagement.

To address these challenges, curriculum integration must adopt a holistic and developmentally responsive framework. Thematic approaches such as learning vocabulary related to family, animals, colors, and daily routines allow children to contextualize Arabic within familiar experiences. Integrating Arabic into routine classroom activities (greetings, classroom instructions, simple dialogues) reinforces natural language acquisition. Additionally, collaboration with parents is essential. Creating supportive home environments through Arabic storybooks, simple conversations, and educational media strengthens consistency between school and home learning contexts (Rahman, 2019).

From a policy standpoint, educational stakeholders should consider formal inclusion of foundational Arabic competencies within ECE curriculum standards. Such inclusion does not necessitate heavy academic pressure but rather structured exposure aligned with child development principles. Teacher training programs in Islamic higher education institutions can incorporate specialized modules on early Arabic pedagogy. Moreover, the development of culturally relevant digital learning applications could expand accessibility, particularly in rural areas.

In conclusion, integrating Arabic language learning into Indonesian early childhood education is both religiously significant and pedagogically justified. Early exposure supports cognitive development through enhanced memory, attention, and metalinguistic awareness. It strengthens phonological foundations crucial for literacy and contributes to moral and spiritual identity formation. Nevertheless, effective implementation requires curriculum reform, teacher professional development, innovative media utilization, and parental involvement. By adopting a holistic, play-based, and developmentally appropriate approach, Arabic learning in early childhood can become a transformative educational investment for Indonesia's future Muslim generations.

METHOD

This research employed a qualitative approach using a case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the implementation of early Arabic language learning in early childhood education. Data were collected through several techniques, namely observation, interviews, documentation, and a literature review. Observations were conducted to examine the learning process and classroom interactions directly, while interviews were carried out with teachers to obtain detailed information regarding instructional strategies and challenges. Documentation, including lesson plans and learning media, was analyzed to support the findings, and relevant literature was reviewed to strengthen the theoretical framework of the study.

Data analysis was conducted using content analysis techniques, which involved data reduction, data presentation, and verification. Data reduction was performed by selecting and focusing on relevant information, followed by organizing and presenting the data systematically to identify patterns and themes. The final stage involved drawing conclusions and verifying findings to ensure validity and consistency. The research was conducted at KB Mustika Putra Kindergarten, located in Dusun Meling, Jetak Village, in November 2025. The participants consisted of two teachers and fifteen children aged 4–5 years.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that early Arabic language learning plays a significant role in strengthening children's religious foundations. Arabic is not merely a communicative tool; rather, it is the primary language of the Qur'an, Hadith, supplications, and foundational Islamic teachings. Therefore, introducing Arabic at an early age enables children to access religious concepts more authentically and meaningfully. Early exposure to Arabic vocabulary related to tawhid (monotheism), worship, gratitude, and moral conduct supports the internalization of Islamic values (Hidayat, 2022; Rohman & Suryana, 2023). Language functions as a mediator of value transmission. When children learn Arabic terms such as Allah, ibadah, doa, and syukur, they are not only acquiring vocabulary but also constructing conceptual understanding related to faith and morality. This aligns with the perspective that language development and moral development are interconnected processes in early childhood (Mahmud, 2020).

Through contextualized Arabic instruction such as Islamic storytelling, nasheed (religious songs), and simple daily expressions children develop both linguistic competence and spiritual awareness simultaneously. Research in early childhood Islamic education demonstrates that integrating language instruction with religious content enhances children's understanding of moral and theological concepts compared to purely memorization-based approaches (Sari & Maulida, 2021). Children are more likely to internalize values when they understand the meaning behind the words they recite. This finding is consistent with developmental psychology, which suggests that young children grasp abstract ideas more effectively when they are connected to symbols, narratives, and concrete experiences (Santrock, 2018). Moreover, character education embedded within language learning fosters self-regulation and empathy. When Arabic lessons include stories about honesty, kindness, and responsibility, children practice moral reasoning within linguistic contexts (Rahman, 2021). Thus, early Arabic learning contributes not only to language acquisition but also to the formation of religious identity and ethical behavior.

The results also indicate that children engaged in early second-language learning demonstrate enhanced cognitive abilities, particularly in executive functioning, memory, and critical thinking. Studies on bilingualism have identified what is often referred to as the "bilingual advantage," where children exposed to two languages exhibit stronger cognitive flexibility and attentional control (Bialystok & Poarch, 2014; Verhagen & Leseman, 2016).

When children learn Arabic alongside their first language, they must manage two linguistic systems. This process strengthens working memory and inhibitory control, as children learn to distinguish between phonological structures and vocabulary sets (Barac et al., 2016). Arabic, with its distinct script and phonetic system, further stimulates visual and auditory memory processes. Recognizing and memorizing hijaiyah letters enhances visual discrimination and symbolic processing (Gathercole & Thomas, 2017).

In addition, second-language acquisition improves metalinguistic awareness the ability to think about language as a system (Nicoladis, 2018). Children begin to notice differences in

grammar, word order, and sound patterns. This analytical engagement promotes critical thinking skills and abstract reasoning. As they compare structures between languages, they develop cognitive flexibility and improved problem-solving abilities (Yang & Yang, 2017).

Interactive activities such as vocabulary games, Arabic songs, and simple dialogue practices reinforce long-term memory retention. According to cognitive load theory, multimodal learning that integrates sound, text, and imagery enhances information processing and retention (Mayer, 2017). Therefore, early Arabic learning contributes not only to linguistic growth but also to broader cognitive development.

The study findings suggest that interactive and contextual Arabic instruction fosters problem-solving skills. When children encounter unfamiliar vocabulary in stories or games, they infer meaning through context clues. This inferential process supports analytical reasoning (Cummins, 2017).

Game-based learning strategies, particularly those involving challenges and structured tasks, stimulate higher-order thinking skills (Plass et al., 2015). Educational games in Arabic encourage children to make decisions, identify correct answers, and evaluate feedback. Such engagement enhances strategic thinking and persistence (Zosh et al., 2017).

Role-play activities further strengthen analytical and social cognition. When children simulate real-life situations using Arabic expressions, they must interpret meaning, respond appropriately, and adapt language to context. This process develops both linguistic competence and socio-cognitive skills.

The effectiveness of early Arabic language learning depends significantly on the development of a responsive curriculum. A responsive curriculum aligns instructional strategies with children's developmental characteristics and socio-cultural backgrounds (NAEYC, 2020).

The thematic approach has proven effective in early language education because it connects vocabulary with meaningful contexts (Pinter, 2017). For example, themes such as "family," "school," or "daily activities" allow children to learn Arabic words like *ummi*, *abi*, *madrasah*, and *kitab* within familiar settings. This contextualization facilitates comprehension and retention.

Play-based learning is another critical component of a responsive curriculum. Research demonstrates that playful learning increases intrinsic motivation, engagement, and deeper conceptual understanding (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2015; Zosh et al., 2017). In Arabic instruction, incorporating puzzles, matching games, and storytelling transforms learning into an enjoyable experience, reducing anxiety and promoting active participation.

Technology integration also enhances curriculum responsiveness. Digital applications designed for young learners provide interactive exercises, audiovisual input, and immediate feedback (Neumann, 2018; Marsh et al., 2018). However, digital use must remain developmentally appropriate and guided by educators to ensure meaningful engagement rather than passive consumption.

The findings reveal that the effectiveness of early Arabic language learning is strongly influenced by the strategic use of varied instructional approaches and media that align with children's developmental characteristics. One of the primary strategies applied is the thematic approach. Thematic learning integrates language instruction with children's lived experiences, making vocabulary meaningful and easier to understand (Pinter, 2017). By organizing lessons around central themes such as family, school, animals, or daily activities, children are able to connect linguistic forms with real-life contexts. This contextualization supports deeper

comprehension because young learners tend to understand language more effectively when it is embedded in familiar and concrete experiences.

In addition to thematic instruction, game-based learning plays a significant role in increasing children's engagement. Research indicates that game-based learning significantly improves motivation and language retention (Plass et al., 2015). Within Arabic language instruction, vocabulary games, matching activities, and simple competitions reduce performance anxiety and foster self-confidence. Children become active participants rather than passive recipients of information. The playful nature of games stimulates curiosity and sustained attention, which are critical components in early childhood learning environments.

Storytelling is another powerful instructional strategy implemented in early Arabic education. Storytelling enhances literacy skills, imagination, and narrative competence (Isbell et al., 2016). When Islamic stories are presented in Arabic, children are simultaneously introduced to moral values and new vocabulary. Through narrative structures, children are able to infer meaning from context, visualize events, and emotionally connect with characters. This process strengthens both linguistic and moral development. Stories also encourage listening comprehension and expressive language skills, particularly when children are invited to retell or dramatize the story.

The integration of audiovisual media further enhances the learning experience. Audiovisual materials provide multimodal input that strengthens phonological awareness and comprehension (Mayer, 2017). Animated Arabic videos, for instance, combine sound, text, and images, enabling children to associate pronunciation with visual representation and contextual meaning. This multimodal stimulation supports memory retention and helps children internalize correct pronunciation patterns. Moreover, audiovisual materials increase students' interest and maintain classroom engagement.

Role play is also utilized as an interactive method to develop communicative competence. Role play supports both language development and social interaction skills (Bodrova & Leong, 2015). Through simulated dialogues and real-life scenarios, children practice using Arabic expressions in meaningful communication. This active use of language strengthens fluency and builds confidence in speaking. Role play also fosters collaboration and empathy, as children learn to interpret and respond appropriately to peers.

Traditional media such as flashcards remain effective in reinforcing vocabulary acquisition. Flashcards facilitate repetition and visual association, which are essential in early language learning (Nation, 2019). By repeatedly exposing children to Arabic words paired with images, flashcards strengthen recognition and recall. The simplicity of flashcards makes them adaptable to various classroom activities, including matching games and quick-response exercises.

Songs are another essential medium in early Arabic instruction. Music improves memory retention and phonological awareness by embedding language within rhythm and melody (Paquette & Rieg, 2016). Arabic songs make repetition enjoyable and less monotonous. Through singing, children practice pronunciation, intonation, and vocabulary in a natural and engaging manner. The rhythmic patterns of songs facilitate memorization and enhance language fluency.

Hand puppets also serve as an effective instructional tool. Puppets stimulate imagination and increase verbal participation among young learners (Cremin et al., 2018). Children often feel more comfortable speaking through symbolic interaction, as puppets reduce anxiety and create a playful atmosphere. Teachers can use puppets to model dialogues, introduce new vocabulary, or

encourage interactive storytelling. This symbolic mediation supports both language development and social-emotional growth.

Visual aids such as posters contribute to continuous exposure to Arabic letters and vocabulary. Posters displayed in classrooms provide passive yet consistent reinforcement of language input (Tomlinson, 2016). Frequent visual exposure strengthens recognition and long-term recall of Arabic script and common expressions. Posters also help create a language-rich environment that immerses children in Arabic learning.

Finally, digital applications are increasingly incorporated into early Arabic instruction. Interactive digital tools enhance engagement by offering structured practice opportunities, instant feedback, and multimedia content (Neumann, 2018). Educational applications designed for young learners support vocabulary acquisition, pronunciation practice, and basic sentence formation. However, digital usage must be developmentally appropriate and guided by teachers to ensure meaningful learning outcomes.

The findings further emphasize the crucial role of parental involvement and the establishment of a supportive Arabic-language environment. Parental involvement significantly influences second-language acquisition outcomes (Lau & Richards, 2021). Children whose parents actively support language practice at home demonstrate stronger vocabulary acquisition, improved speaking confidence, and more consistent language exposure. When parents participate in reviewing vocabulary, practicing simple dialogues, or encouraging daily Arabic expressions, children receive reinforcement beyond the classroom setting.

Family language policies that incorporate simple Arabic expressions into daily routines strengthen exposure and reinforcement (King & Fogle, 2017). For example, using Arabic greetings, short supplications, or basic commands during daily interactions familiarizes children with practical language use. This consistent exposure enhances retention and builds communicative competence. Moreover, a supportive Arabic-language environment both at school and at home creates continuity in linguistic input. Such consistency accelerates language acquisition and contributes to the formation of religious identity, as children associate Arabic not only with academic learning but also with daily life and spiritual practice.

The findings and discussion of this study can be seen in the following diagram.

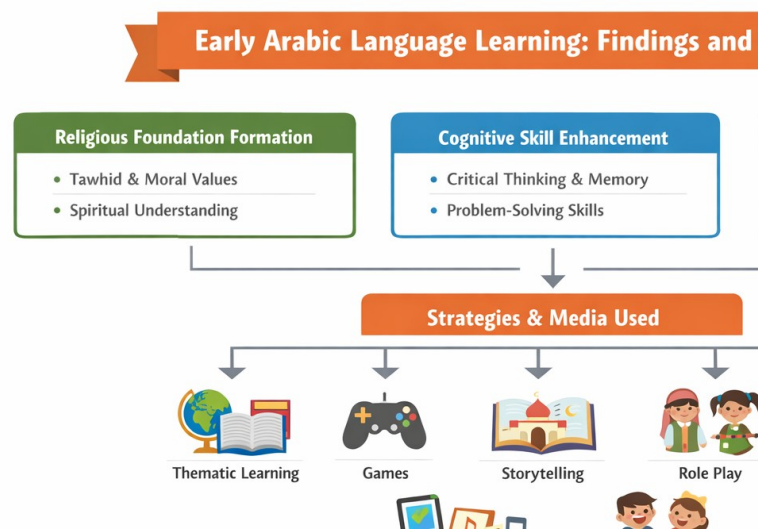


Figure 1. Early Arabic Language Learning in the Early Childhood Education Curriculum

Overall, the integration of diverse strategies, varied instructional media, and strong parental support creates a holistic learning ecosystem. This comprehensive approach ensures that early Arabic language learning is not limited to classroom instruction but becomes an integral part of children's cognitive, social, and spiritual development.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that early Arabic language learning plays a significant role in strengthening children's religious foundations, enhancing cognitive development, and fostering communicative competence. Through responsive curriculum design and the integration of diverse strategies such as thematic learning, game-based activities, storytelling, audiovisual media, role play, songs, and digital applications, Arabic instruction becomes meaningful, engaging, and developmentally appropriate. Furthermore, parental involvement and the creation of a supportive Arabic-language environment at home and school significantly reinforce learning outcomes. Therefore, a holistic approach that combines pedagogical innovation, interactive media, and family support is essential to optimize early Arabic language acquisition and support children's cognitive, social, and spiritual development.

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