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A Comparative Analysis of English and Arabic Language Comprehension among First-Semester Students at STAI Al-Jami Banjarmasin

Maulida
Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam (STAI) Al Jami Banjarmasin, Indonesia
Lida64663@gmail.com

Mutia Zahra
Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam (STAI) Al Jami Banjarmasin, Indonesia
mutiaalfaqihi@gmail.com

Nurhasanah
Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam (STAI) Al Jami Banjarmasin, Indonesia
ilanara087@gmail.com

Nur Iqlima Az-Zahro
Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam (STAI) Al Jami Banjarmasin, Indonesia
niaazzaahroo@gmail.com

Nurul Hasanah
Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam (STAI) Al Jami Banjarmasin, Indonesia
nurulhasa495@gmail.com

Nurunnajwa
Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam (STAI) Al Jami Banjarmasin, Indonesia
nurunjw@gmail.com

Abstract

This study aims to comparatively analyze the levels of English and Arabic language comprehension among university students based on their prior formal educational backgrounds, specifically contrasting Islamic boarding schools (Pesantren)/Islamic Senior High Schools (Madrasah Aliyah) with public schools (SMA/SMK). A descriptive quantitative approach with a survey method was employed, distributing closed-ended questionnaires to 43 student respondents. The findings reveal that educational background significantly influences students' linguistic preparedness Approximately 90.7% of the respondents from Pesantren and Madrasah Aliyah backgrounds demonstrated robust mastery of Arabic structural grammar (Nahwu and Shorof), with the majority of their comprehension falling into the "Moderate" category (62.8%). Conversely, this same group of students experienced a noticeable deficit in English proficiency: 48.8% of the students scored at a "Low"

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comprehension level, and 55.8% of them frequently encountered chronic obstacles in English structure and grammar. The implications of this study highlight the urgent need to engineer immersive learning ecosystems (bi'ah lughawiyah) to balance the competencies of both foreign languages at the higher education level.
Keywords: Arabic Language, Educational Background, English Language

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis secara membandingkan tingkat pemahaman Bahasa Inggris dan Bahasa Arab mahasiswa berdasarkan latar belakang pendidikan formal mereka sebelum perguruan tinggi, yaitu antara pondok pesantren/Madrasah Aliyah (MA) dan sekolah umum (SMA/SMK). Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah kuantitatif deskriptif berbasis survei dengan menyebarkan angket tertutup kepada 43 mahasiswa sebagai responden. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa latar belakang pendidikan berpengaruh signifikan terhadap kemampuan berbahasa pada mahasiswa. Sebanyak 90,7% responden yang berlatar belakang pesantren dan MA menunjukkan penguasaan struktur Bahasa Arab (Nahwu dan Shorof) yang kuat, dengan mayoritas tingkat pemahaman berada pada kategori Cukup (62,8%). Sebaliknya, kelompok mahasiswa tersebut mengalami penurunan pemahaman pada Bahasa Inggris sebesar 48,8% mahasiswa berada pada tingkat pemahaman Rendah, dan 55,8% di antaranya sering terbentur kendala tata bahasa (grammar). Implikasi penelitian ini menegaskan perlunya rekayasa lingkungan belajar aktif (bi'ah lughawiyah) guna menyeimbangkan kompetensi kedua bahasa asing tersebut di tingkat perguruan tinggi.
Kata Kunci: Bahasa Arab, Latar Belakang Pendidikan, Bahasa Inggris

INTRODUCTION

In an era of globalization that demands cross-border connectivity, mastery of a foreign language has become an absolute competency for university students. Two foreign languages that occupy strategic positions in the Indonesian education curriculum are English and Arabic. English is universally positioned as the primary international language that bridges science, technology, and the global workplace (M. Sukardi, 2021).

English proficiency is crucial in the era of globalization to support education, attract foreign investment, and open up global job opportunities. However, the language issue in Indonesia is quite complex because it involves three main aspects: language variety, the level of quality of use, and the speakers' attitudes toward the language. In the educational context, Madrasah Aliyah (Islamic Senior High School), Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), and high schools (SMA) are institutions that produce generations that equip their students with various language competencies. Some modern Islamic boarding schools have even implemented bilingual communication habits on a regular basis. (Nasrudin, 2017)

On the other hand, Arabic plays a crucial role both as a regional communication language and as an essential instrument in strengthening Islamic religious literacy and the study of classical Islamic legal texts (Nuha, 2012).

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English has developed into a global language used in various fields of life, including education, science, technology, and international communication. Learning English encompasses several key skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Therefore, understanding English involves more than just vocabulary mastery, but also the ability to use the language in various forms of communication. Learning Arabic encompasses mastery of various language elements and skills that need to be developed through continuous learning and practice. Therefore, Arabic language skills are not solely acquired through theoretical understanding but also require practice.

Students' success in mastering both languages is inextricably linked to the initial capital they received from their previous educational institutions. The Indonesian educational system separates language instruction between public schools (SMA/SMK) and religious-based institutions (Pondok Pesantren and Madrasah Aliyah). Pesantren institutions generally implement an intensive system through the creation of a language environment (bi'ah lughawiyah) and the intensive integration of daily Arabic grammar.

In contrast, public schools focus their academic portion on mastering English as exam material and national curriculum requirements, although they are often still limited to traditional theoretical approaches (Syah & Wardan, 1999).

Although students who graduated from Islamic boarding schools are generally assumed to be superior, previous research conducted by Siti Aisyah showed that students with a high school background actually had better average performance in mastering certain English grammar, such as the use of tenses, articles, prepositions, and other structures, with an average score difference of 4.50.

When graduates from these two contrasting educational backgrounds meet at university, a stark disparity in language competency emerges. Students from religious backgrounds often struggle with English grammar, while students from public schools experience alienation from the complex linguistic structures of Arabic.

This phenomenon of dichotomy in ability requires a clear quantitative mapping. Therefore, this study aims to descriptively measure the level of understanding, linguistic constraints, and the influence of external factors on students' English and Arabic comprehension across educational backgrounds to provide a basis for balanced pedagogical recommendations. Linguistic problems are those related to the elements or components of language, while non-linguistic problems are those related to psychological factors such as motivation and individual differences within a class (Nashihin, 2019).

The problems of learning Arabic can be classified into two main aspects, namely linguistic problems and non-linguistic problems. Linguistic problems are directly related to the internal elements of the language, which include the complexity of mastering vocabulary (mufradat), grammar (qawa'id), word formation (sharaf), sentence construction rules (nahwu and i'rab), and word and sentence structure (tarkib). As stated by Tarigan, the quality of a person's language skills is greatly influenced by the quality and quantity of vocabulary they master. In line with this view, Asifuddin explains that learning mufradat is the process of

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conveying and mastering vocabulary as a basic foundation in learning Arabic that must be aligned with various patterns and structures of its use. Thus, mastery of vocabulary and language rules is a fundamental element that determines students' ability to understand, interpret, and use Arabic appropriately.

In addition to linguistic factors, the process of mastering Arabic is also influenced by non-linguistic issues related to psychological aspects, environmental conditions, and individual differences in students. This is in line with the view of Syaiful Bahri Djamarah who classifies individual differences in students into three main aspects. First, the biological aspect, namely differences in physical condition and biological characteristics of students that can affect learning activities and social interactions with their surroundings. Second, the intellectual aspect, namely differences in intelligence levels and cognitive abilities that play a significant role in determining learning success, especially the ability to understand, process information, adapt, and respond to new situations and conditions quickly and effectively. Third, the psychological aspect, namely differences in psychological characteristics, interests, motivations, attitudes, and emotional conditions of students that also determine readiness and success in participating in the learning process. These three aspects indicate that the success of Arabic language mastery is not only determined by the complexity of the linguistic material, but is also influenced by the individual characteristics and psychological conditions of students that need to be considered in the implementation of learning. Students who come from public or non-Islamic boarding school backgrounds often experience anxiety, feelings of inferiority, and learning gaps because they feel their basic knowledge is not comparable to that of Islamic boarding school graduates. (Sehra, 2021)

Responding to these mental barriers, Ahmad Fuad Efendi provided guidance that to master speaking skills (maharatul kalam), a learner must be able to throw away shame, fear of making mistakes, and the mistaken perception that Arabic is a difficult subject. To support this psychological aspect, the presence of an active language environment (bi'ah lughawiyah) plays a fundamental role in fostering student habits. (Pratama et al., 2022) Therefore, to bridge these various ability gaps, supervising lecturers are required to implement strategic steps in the classroom, such as grouping students based on proficiency level, providing additional classes, and implementing a variety of dynamic learning models, ranging from the use of audio and film to reading exercises and composing written works in a directed manner. sentences. (Pratama et al., 2022)

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Basic Concepts of Language Understanding

Language comprehension is a fundamental aspect of the language learning process, reflecting an individual's ability to receive, process, interpret, and use linguistic information appropriately. Language comprehension is not only related to the ability to memorize vocabulary or understand grammatical rules, but also includes the ability to understand word meaning, sentence structure, communication context, and messages conveyed through

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spoken and written language. In the context of higher education, language comprehension is a crucial competency because students are required to be able to access various sources of knowledge, participate in academic activities, read literature, and develop communication skills. This ability is increasingly important with the increasing need for foreign language proficiency in academic and professional environments. Therefore, measuring language comprehension needs to consider various dimensions of linguistic ability, not just theoretical learning outcomes.

In the study of language acquisition and learning, comprehension can be divided into receptive and productive comprehension. Receptive comprehension relates to listening and reading skills, while productive skills encompass speaking and writing. These four skills are interconnected components in shaping a person's communicative competence. Students who are able to comprehend written texts do not necessarily have the same ability to understand spoken conversation or express ideas verbally. Therefore, research on English and Arabic comprehension needs to consider the dimensions of language skills comprehensively to produce a more objective picture of student abilities.

2. The Nature of English Learning

English is an international language that plays a strategic role in global communication, the development of science, education, technology, and international interaction. In higher education, mastery of English provides students with opportunities to access international academic literature, understand scientific publications, keep abreast of developments in knowledge, and participate in cross-cultural communication. English learning is not only directed at mastering grammatical structures, but also at the ability to use the language communicatively according to academic needs and daily life. Therefore, success in English learning is influenced by vocabulary mastery, grammatical understanding, reading ability, listening skills, and the courage to use the language actively.

English comprehension is also related to psychological factors and the learning environment. Motivation, interest, self-confidence, previous learning experiences, and intensity of language use are some of the factors that can influence a student's ability to comprehend English. Students who have had experience learning English since elementary and secondary school may have a different level of familiarity than those who have received limited learning. Furthermore, exposure to English through digital media, films, music, the internet, and online learning resources can contribute to the development of language competence. This situation indicates that the abilities of first-semester students cannot be understood solely based on learning that takes place in higher education, but rather requires consideration of previous language experiences.

3. The Reality of Learning Arabic

Arabic holds a crucial position in Islamic higher education as the primary language of the Quran, the Hadith, classical Islamic literature, and various sources of knowledge within the Islamic intellectual tradition. For students at Islamic religious universities, the ability to understand Arabic has strong academic and religious relevance. Mastery of Arabic enables

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students to read Islamic texts in their original languages, understand religious terminology, study traditional books, and avoid relying entirely on translations. Thus, learning Arabic is not only communicative but also serves as an instrument for developing academic skills, deepening religious understanding, and broadening students' intellectual horizons.

Learning Arabic has distinct linguistic characteristics from learning English. Arabic has a system of morphology (sharf), syntax (nahwu), word formation, root word system, and sentence structure that require an understanding of the relationships between language components. Furthermore, the differences between fusha Arabic and the varieties of Arabic used in everyday communication can pose unique challenges for learners. Students who lack a sufficient foundation in Arabic may face difficulties recognizing vocabulary, reading Arabic texts, understanding sentence structure, and identifying meaning based on context. Therefore, Arabic language comprehension needs to be analyzed based on the learning characteristics and educational background of students.

4. Comparison of Characteristics of English and Arabic Language Learning

English and Arabic have different linguistic characteristics, social functions, and learning orientations. English is positioned more as an instrument of international communication and access to global scientific developments, while Arabic has a strategic function as a language of communication and the primary source of Islamic teachings and scholarly traditions. These differences in orientation can influence students' motivation to learn both languages. Students at Islamic universities may be drawn to Arabic because of the need to understand the Quran and religious literature, while English is studied for academic and professional reasons. However, these differences in learning objectives do not automatically indicate that students' understanding of one language is superior to the other.

Linguistically, English has a grammatical system that includes tenses, word order, verb forms, nouns, adjectives, and sentence structure. Meanwhile, Arabic has a linguistic system that involves grammar, grammar, word changes, i'rab, and grammatical relationships within a sentence. Both languages require vocabulary mastery and an understanding of language structure, but the characteristics of their linguistic systems present different forms of difficulty for students. The difference in writing systems is also important, because English uses the Latin alphabet with a left-to-right writing direction, while Arabic uses Arabic script with a right-to-left writing direction. This situation allows students to demonstrate different levels of ability in understanding the two languages, especially if previous learning experiences are not balanced.

Comparisons of English and Arabic language comprehension can be conducted using a number of relatively equivalent indicators. These indicators include vocabulary mastery, grammar comprehension, reading comprehension, listening comprehension, and the ability to understand sentence meaning based on context. Using the same indicators is important to avoid biased assessments. For example, if English comprehension is measured solely on vocabulary, while Arabic comprehension is measured on reading comprehension, the comparison will not reveal true differences in ability. Therefore, measurement instruments

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must be designed based on construct equivalence, level of difficulty, and the characteristics of the students as research subjects.

Comparative aspects	English	Arabic
Main functions	International communication and access to knowledge	Communication and access to Islamic scientific sources
Writing system	Latin alphabet	Arabic script
Direction of writing	Left to right	Right to left
Vocabulary	Vocabulary	Mufradat
Grammar	Grammar	Grammar and grammar
Reading	Reading	Qira'ah
Listening	Listening	Estimate
Speak	Speaking	Kalam
Writing	Writing	Book of Revelation
Common challenges	Vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar and confidence	Vocabulary, grammar, grammar, and differences in language structure

5. Factors that Influence Students' Language Comprehension

Foreign language comprehension is influenced by interrelated internal and external factors. Internal factors include learning motivation, interest, cognitive ability, academic readiness, self-confidence, and prior learning experiences. Motivation plays a crucial role because it determines students' commitment to learning, their development of study habits, and their ability to overcome difficulties in understanding the material. Students with high motivation tend to be more active in seeking additional learning resources and practicing independently. Conversely, low motivation can result in passive learning, resulting in less than optimal language competency development. In the context of this research, student motivation needs to be considered because the reasons for learning English are not necessarily the same as those for learning Arabic.

Previous educational experience also has a close relationship with the level of language comprehension of first-semester students. Students from high schools (SMA), vocational schools (SMK), Islamic boarding schools (MA), and Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) may have different language learning experiences. Some students may have received continuous English instruction since elementary school, while students from madrasahs or Islamic boarding schools may have more intensive Arabic language learning experience. Conversely, students who graduated from public schools may have limited Arabic vocabulary, reading Arabic script, and understanding the rules of grammar and

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grammar. These differences in background can result in varying levels of initial proficiency, even among students in the same semester and at the same educational institution.

External factors include learning methods, lecturer competence, availability of teaching materials, educational facilities, the language environment, and the intensity of language use in daily life. A supportive learning environment can provide students with opportunities for continuous language practice, both through academic activities and social interactions. The use of digital media also provides opportunities to improve language skills through learning videos, vocabulary apps, digital dictionaries, audio materials, and online reading resources. However, the presence of digital resources does not automatically improve comprehension without appropriate learning objectives, usage strategies, and guidance. Therefore, an analysis of English and Arabic language comprehension needs to consider the relationship between individual student abilities and the learning environment.

METHOD

This research uses a descriptive quantitative approach with a survey method. Quantitative descriptive research is describing, examining, and explaining something being studied as it is, and drawing conclusions from observable phenomena using numbers. According to Sugiyono (2019), the descriptive method is one of the various quantitative research methods with a problem formulation that combines research to explore or capture the social situation to be studied comprehensively, broadly, and in-depth. It aims to systematically describe the facts or characteristics of a particular population or a particular field factually and accurately.

The use of this method is intended to map the phenomenon numerically without providing special treatment to the independent variables. Primary data collection was conducted digitally in the odd semester of the academic year through the distribution of closed-ended questionnaire instruments, in which respondents chose the answer that best represented their objective conditions from the multiple options provided. The sample in this study consisted of 43 student respondents taken using a purposive sampling technique. All collected answer data were processed using descriptive statistics. The processing step began with the stage of coding the raw data into a Microsoft Excel worksheet, followed by frequency tabulation to calculate the number of responses to each question item. To measure the percentage trend in each indicator, the following basic percentage formula was used:

$$P = \frac{f}{n} \times 100\%$$

respondents who chose a particular option, and$n$stating the total number of respondents ($n = 43$The results of the calculations were then analyzed comparatively to compare the achievements between the English and Arabic language ability aspects.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

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1. Student Educational Background and Orientation Profile

Based on the demographic data from the questionnaire, the distribution of respondents' formal educational backgrounds was dominated by Islamic religious institutions. A total of 48.8% (21 students) were graduates of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), and 41.9% (18 students) were from Islamic high schools (MA). Public schools only made up a minority, with high school/vocational school graduates accounting for 7% (3 students) and Package C/Homeschooling graduates accounting for 2.3% (1 student). Thus, the cumulative proportion of students who had a close relationship with a religious-based academic culture before college reached 90.7%.

Regarding the perceived urgency of language learning, students viewed the importance of compulsory foreign language learning as being based on global awareness. As many as 46.5% of respondents identified this urgency as being due to its status as an international language, followed by the demands of the formal school curriculum (34.9%), and as a language of science (18.6%). Interestingly, no students (0%) attributed the urgency of language learning in this early phase solely to a direct orientation to the world of work, indicating a more diverse perspective.

2 Mapping English Language Ability and Difficulty

The limited public school background of the sample had a linear impact on students' English language competency performance. When asked to self-assess their abilities, the data showed a low, polarized distribution of abilities, as presented in the table below.

Ability Category	English (f)	English (%)	Arabic (f)	Arabic (%)
High	0	0%	2	4,70%
Enough	21	48,80%	27	62,80%
Low	21	48,80%	11	25,60%
Very Low	1	2,30%	3	7,00%
Total	**43**	**100%**	**43**	**100%**

Based on Table 1, not a single student (0%) felt they had a high level of understanding in English, with the dominant figures piled up in the Sufficient (48.8%) and Low (48.8%) categories. In terms of actual mastery, 44.2% of respondents admitted to only knowing vocabulary randomly without being able to string together or understand sentence structure (grammar) comprehensively. Only a small proportion (11.6%) felt they had mastered the integrative aspects including structure, speaking, and listening.

The main difficulties students face in English stem from two dominant factors. First, the phonological-orthographic factor (pronunciation of the writing system/structure (grammar and nahwu shorof)), where 37.2% of students struggle to bridge the sharp gap between written text and pronunciation. Second, the syntactic factor, where 27.9% of students feel that English sentence structure is too complicated. When narrowed down to

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specific aspects, structure/grammar rules were confirmed by 48.8% of students as the most difficult problem, followed by the general view that all aspects of English are difficult (34.9%). This correlates with the high frequency of obstacles; as many as 55.8% of students admitted**often**experiencing difficulties in the process of understanding English grammar.

3 Mapping Arabic Language Ability and Difficulty

The opposite situation was found for the Arabic language variable. As an extension of the dominant Islamic boarding school (pesantren) and Islamic high school (MA) graduates (90.7%), students' understanding of this language is much more established. Based on data from Table 1, the majority of respondents were in the "Sufficient" understanding category (62.8%), with 4.7% of students even feeling they were at the "High" level. Practically, 53.5% of students stated explicitly that they understood the basic rules of Nahwu (Arabic syntax) and Shorof (Arabic morphology).

However, Arabic still presents structural difficulties. The rules of grammar and syntax were recognized by 65.1% of students as the most difficult aspects of Arabic grammar due to the complexity of inflectional changes (i'rab). However, what differentiates it from English is the intensity of the obstacles; the frequency of students stating that they "often" have difficulty with Arabic grammar was only 32.6%, much lower than in English (55.8%). Rather than being hampered by a theoretical understanding of the text, the real obstacle complained of by 41.9% of Arabic students was the lack of practical, applied practice space, both in formal spoken and written production.

4 External Factor Analysis and Pedagogical Solutions

This ability gap provides strong confirmation of the importance of external environmental factors in second language acquisition. As many as 60.5% of respondents agreed that an active communicative environment (bi'ah lughawiyah) is the most recent factor that accelerates pronunciation and listening habits of a foreign language. This immersive environment is what Islamic boarding school graduates have for Arabic, but is absent for their English. This study concludes that a secondary education background has a strong horizontal influence on the map of students' foreign language comprehension in higher education. The dominance of Islamic boarding school and Madrasah Aliyah graduates (90.7%) is directly proportional to the high level of adaptation and understanding of Arabic language structures (Nahwu and Shorof), placing the majority of students in the "Fair" understanding category (62.8%). Conversely, this condition creates a deficit effect on English language competence, where 48.8% of students are at the "Low" level of understanding and 55.8% of them experience chronic obstacles in the structure/grammar aspect.

As a solution, in facing the learning process in class, students consider two-way interaction to play a key role; as many as 48.8% of students stated that the combination of creative teaching methods of teachers and clear delivery of material is the main stimulus for their understanding. When asked about independent strategies for quick understanding, the majority chose to increase focus when the tutor explains in class (48.8%) and to memorize vocabulary independently (34.9%). To maintain the continuity of this performance,

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psychological motivation plays a large role; as many as 69.8% of students emphasized that intrinsic motivation is "very important" as the main driving force (primary drive) so that they remain consistent in learning amidst minimal support from the daily environmental ecosystem.

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CONCLUSION

Based on the results of a study on the comparative analysis of English and Arabic language comprehension among first-semester students at STAI Al-Jami Banjarmasin, differences in the level of comprehension were found related to the students' educational background. As many as 90.7% of respondents were graduates of Islamic boarding schools and Madrasah Aliyah, which provided religious and Arabic language learning experiences before entering college. This is reflected in the majority of students (62.8%) who have a sufficient understanding of Arabic, while English comprehension tends to be lower, with 48.8% of students in the low category. English language difficulties primarily lie in mastery of grammar, sentence structure, and pronunciation, with 55.8% of students admitting to frequently experiencing difficulties in understanding grammar. Meanwhile, Arabic language difficulties are more dominant in mastery of nahwu and sharaf, which were recognized by 65.1% of respondents as the most difficult aspects, although the intensity of difficulties frequently experienced was relatively lower, at 32.6%. These findings indicate that previous educational experience is related to the tendency of students' abilities to understand both languages, although mastery of the practical aspects of Arabic, especially speaking and writing, still requires strengthening.

The learning environment and intrinsic motivation, in addition to educational background, are important factors in supporting the mastery of both languages. Sixty-five percent of students considered the communicative environment (bi'ah lughawiyah) to be crucial in accelerating language comprehension, while 69.8 percent stated that intrinsic motivation was crucial for maintaining consistent learning. Therefore, English learning should be directed at strengthening vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, while Arabic learning should emphasize the application of grammar and grammar (nahwu) and sharaf (sharf) as well as improving oral and written communication practices. Both learning styles need to be supported by creative and interactive teaching methods, clear delivery of material, ongoing practice, and the creation of a conducive language environment. Therefore, developing a balanced learning environment for English and Arabic is a strategic necessity to enhance students' academic competence while strengthening their scientific capacity in Islamic higher education. These findings demonstrate that mastery of linguistic theory without the support of an inclusive environmental ecosystem will trigger competency disparities. Recommendations that can be submitted to study program managers in higher education include designing immersive learning models (more in-depth learning about language), such as the provision of community-based language laboratories or English Areas (English environments) that adopt the successful concept of bi'ah lughawiyah (Arabic language environments). In addition, lecturer intervention is needed to provide a more balanced portion of practical exercises between grammatical theory and real communicative skills to boost students' motivation for independent learning.

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