



Reorienting Arabic Language Learning: Designing a Linguistic Immersion Model as an Academic Identity

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Abstract

A persistent challenge in Arabic language education within Islamic higher education is the disconnect between students' theoretical mastery of grammar and their limited communicative competence in authentic campus settings. This study aims to design an integrative linguistic immersion model that reorients Arabic learning as a core element of academic identity at IAI Tihamah Cirebon. Employing a qualitative conceptual design complemented by field observations, data were collected through systematic literature review, non-participant campus observations, document analysis, and semi-structured interviews with lecturers, students, and administrators, then analyzed via qualitative content analysis with triangulation and member-checking. The findings reveal three interrelated challenges – program fragmentation, absence of language zoning, and instrumental student perceptions – that informed the formulation of a three-pillar immersion model comprising curricular immersion, co-curricular immersion, and institutional language policy. A phased partial-immersion approach, beginning with approximately 50 percent Arabic-mediated instruction, is recommended as contextually feasible. The model advances both theoretical understanding of immersion in faith-based higher education and practical pathways for cultivating a sustainable Arabic-speaking academic ecosystem.

Keywords: Academic identity, arabic language learning, language immersion, language policy, partial immersion.

1. Introduction

In the field of second language acquisition (SLA), the language environment (*bi'ah lughawiyyah*) is widely recognized as one of the most crucial factors influencing successful language learning (Asrofi et al., 2025). Language cannot be effectively acquired merely as a body of theoretical knowledge; rather, it must be brought to life through interaction, habitual use, and everyday communicative experiences. However, the reality in many Islamic higher education institutions reveals a persistent disconnection between the study of Arabic grammatical theories (*nahw* and *ṣarf*) in the classroom and the spontaneous use of Arabic in campus communication (Randy, 2026). As a result, Arabic is often confined to a theoretical subject of study

rather than functioning as a living medium of academic communication (Rosyadi & Fata, 2025). This structural-communicative divide undermines the very purpose of Arabic language education in Islamic higher education, where the language is expected to serve both scholarly and religious functions.

The current landscape of Arabic language education in Indonesia further illustrates a significant gap between learning objectives that emphasize communicative competence and instructional practices that remain largely structural and classroom-centered (Rafli et al., 2025). This situation necessitates a paradigm shift from the mere transmission of linguistic knowledge toward the deliberate creation of immersive learning environments that enable students to experience and use the language authentically. Such a perspective aligns with the ideas advanced by Prof. Tulus Mustofa in his inaugural professorial address, in which he underscored the importance of language immersion as a strategy for fostering authentic and sustainable language experiences in Arabic language education within Indonesian Islamic higher education institutions (*Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam – PTKI*).

In the bilingual education literature, language immersion programs are commonly classified according to the extent of target-language use. Genesee (1987) and Baker (2011) distinguish total immersion, partial immersion, and two-way immersion, while Met (1998) further categorizes programs into full immersion, partial immersion, and content-based language instruction. Content-based immersion, in particular, has been regarded as pedagogically practical for higher education because it integrates the target language into academic coursework without requiring a complete overhaul of the curriculum. Yet these models, largely developed in Canadian French immersion and Western bilingual contexts, have rarely been critically examined for their transferability to Arabic language learning in non-native, faith-based higher education settings, where religious discourse, limited resources, and institutional culture present distinct constraints.

Previous research by Mustofa (2023) examined the implementation of language immersion within Indonesian PTKI. However, that study did not address the systematic design of immersion models tailored to developing institutions such as IAI Tihamah. This constitutes a clear research gap. IAI Tihamah possesses a strategic opportunity to strengthen its academic identity through the development of an immersive linguistic ecosystem (Fadlilah, 2023). Addressing this gap is urgent: without an institutionally grounded immersion model, Arabic risks remaining a passive academic subject rather than becoming the living medium of scholarly interaction that defines the institution's distinctive identity.

The primary challenge lies in designing a model that is both pedagogically robust and contextually feasible within the resource and cultural realities of a developing Islamic higher education institution. Accordingly, this study aims to formulate an

integrative linguistic immersion model specifically adapted to IAI Tihamah. By bridging theoretical insights from SLA and bilingual education with the institutional particularities of IAI Tihamah, the research seeks not only to overcome the identified limitations of prior studies but also to contribute a novel, transferable framework that reorients Arabic language learning as a core element of academic identity formation.

2. Method

This study adopted a qualitative conceptual research design complemented by field observations to develop an integrative linguistic immersion model tailored to the institutional context of IAI Tihamah Cirebon. The qualitative approach was selected to enable an in-depth, interpretive understanding of the complex social and pedagogical phenomena surrounding Arabic language use in its natural institutional setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Conceptual data were generated through a systematic literature review encompassing second language acquisition theory, bilingual education, language immersion models, and language policy. Empirical data were obtained via non-participant observations of the campus linguistic environment, Arabic language development programs, and related institutional documents, supplemented by semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders (lecturers, students, and program administrators). Data collection proceeded iteratively until thematic saturation was reached, ensuring that both theoretical insights and contextual realities were adequately captured.

The collected data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018), involving systematic coding, categorization, and interpretation of textual and observational materials to identify recurring patterns, challenges, and enabling conditions. To enhance methodological rigor, the analysis incorporated triangulation of data sources (literature, observations, interviews, and documents) and member-checking with selected institutional informants. The resulting themes were then synthesized through an iterative process of theoretical integration and contextual adaptation, culminating in the formulation of a three-pillar linguistic immersion model (curricular, co-curricular, and institutional policy) aligned with the specific needs, constraints, and academic-identity aspirations of IAI Tihamah. This transparent and reflexive analytical pathway ensures that the proposed model is both theoretically grounded and practically feasible within a developing Islamic higher education institution.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Theoretical Foundations of Linguistic Immersion

Linguistic immersion rests on the foundational premise that second-language acquisition is most effective when the target language functions simultaneously as

the object and the medium of learning. Drawing on established SLA and bilingual education scholarship, immersion environments provide sustained, meaningful exposure to the target language across academic and social domains, thereby facilitating both linguistic proficiency and cognitive development (Genesee, 1987; Baker, 2011). Within this framework, content-based instruction emerges as a particularly suitable approach for higher education, as it integrates language learning with disciplinary content without requiring a complete restructuring of the curriculum (Met, 1998).

These theoretical principles are further enriched by sociocultural and interactionist perspectives. Vygotsky's (1978) notion of language as a tool of social mediation underscores that linguistic competence develops through participation in authentic communicative practices, while Krashen's (1985) comprehensible-input hypothesis and Long's (1996) interaction hypothesis highlight the critical role of continuous exposure and meaning negotiation. Collectively, these foundations position immersion not merely as a pedagogical technique but as an ecological strategy for cultivating a living language environment—one that is especially pertinent to the reorientation of Arabic language learning as a core component of institutional academic identity in Islamic higher education settings such as IAI Tihamah.

3.2. Identifying Challenges in the Implementation of Arabic Language Immersion at IAI Tihamah

Based on the findings from observations, interviews, and the review of language program documents at IAI Tihamah, three major challenges were identified as affecting the effectiveness of the Arabic language immersion program: (1) the fragmentation of language programs that remain insufficiently integrated, (2) the absence of consistently implemented language zoning policies, and (3) students' perceptions of Arabic as merely an academic requirement. These challenges are interconnected and collectively hinder the development of a supportive language environment, which constitutes the primary foundation of a successful immersion program.

The first challenge concerns the fragmentation of language programs. Observational field notes and document analysis revealed that Arabic language courses, intensive training sessions, *muhadathah* (conversation) programs, and Arabic-oriented student activities operate as discrete initiatives rather than as interconnected components of a coherent learning ecosystem. Interview data further corroborated this pattern: one senior lecturer remarked, "Each unit runs its own program; there is no shared roadmap linking classroom instruction with extracurricular practice." Consequently, students frequently perceive these activities as isolated requirements rather than mutually reinforcing stages of competence development. This finding resonates with Wenger's (1998) concept of a community of practice, which posits that

learning becomes more effective when activities are embedded within a sustained community of participation. The absence of such coherence at IAI Tihamah thus limits the potential of existing programs to cultivate a vibrant and continuous language culture.

The second challenge relates to the lack of consistently enforced language zoning. Systematic campus observations conducted over several weeks showed that Arabic use remained largely confined to formal classroom settings; outside these spaces, Indonesian and local languages overwhelmingly dominated student and staff interactions. Field notes recorded, for instance, that even in designated “Arabic corners,” conversations rapidly shifted to Indonesian once informal discussions began. This restricted exposure undermines the continuous comprehensible input essential for acquisition (Krashen, 1985) and reduces opportunities for meaning negotiation through authentic interaction (Long, 1996). As a result, the campus environment has yet to function as a genuine immersion space capable of supporting sustained linguistic development.

The third challenge concerns students’ instrumental perceptions of Arabic. Interview findings indicated that many students continue to view Arabic primarily as a curricular subject required for academic progression rather than as a living medium of communication. One student participant stated, “I use Arabic only when the lecturer is present; after class, it feels unnatural.” Such orientations produce short-term, performance-oriented engagement that ceases once formal instruction ends, reflecting a persistent gap between language as knowledge and language as social practice. From a sociocultural perspective (Vygotsky, 1978), language develops through mediation in real-life contexts; therefore, transforming these perceptions is essential for the internalization of communicative habits across everyday campus life.

Taken together, these empirically grounded findings demonstrate that merely increasing the number of language activities is insufficient. A more systematic approach is required—one that integrates existing programs into a unified developmental framework, institutionalizes consistent language zoning, and fosters a shift in student perceptions toward Arabic as a core element of academic identity and community practice.

3.3 Integrative Immersion Model Design

Building directly on the three empirically identified challenges—program fragmentation, limited language zoning, and instrumental student perceptions—this study proposes an integrative Arabic language immersion model structured around three mutually reinforcing pillars: curricular immersion, co-curricular immersion, and institutional language policy. These pillars were derived through an iterative synthesis of field findings and theoretical insights, forming a coherent linguistic ecosystem designed to supply continuous input, authentic interaction, and sustained

opportunities for Arabic use in both academic and social domains. The model aligns with core principles of immersion education that treat the target language simultaneously as object and medium of learning and as a vehicle for academic community building (Genesee, 1987; Baker, 2011), while remaining attentive to the distinctive religious and cultural functions of Arabic within Islamic higher education.

The first pillar, curricular immersion, addresses the fragmentation of existing programs by embedding Arabic as a medium of instruction within selected academic courses (Arrasyid et al., 2026). In the initial phase, lecturers are encouraged to employ Arabic for approximately 50 percent of classroom interaction—particularly in openings, explanations of familiar concepts, and guided discussions—thereby converting formal instruction into a consistent source of comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985; Genesee, 1987). This measured threshold emerged inductively from observational data showing that abrupt full immersion would exceed current lecturer readiness and student proficiency levels.

The second pillar, co-curricular immersion, responds to the absence of language zoning by transforming dormitories, discussion forums, student organizations, and extracurricular activities into designated Arabic-speaking zones. Grounded in interactionist and sociocultural perspectives (Long, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978), these spaces extend language practice beyond the classroom and foster the social mediation necessary for perceptual change. Interview evidence that students rapidly abandon Arabic once formal sessions end directly informed the prioritization of these authentic, low-stakes environments.

The third pillar, institutional language policy, supplies the regulatory and infrastructural scaffolding required for sustainability (Özmen & Bağcı, 2026). Drawing on Spolsky's (2004) tripartite model of language policy, this pillar encompasses formal regulations, supporting resources (bilingual signage, language centers, professional development), and the cultivation of shared language ideologies. Lecturers' consistent modeling of Arabic use is positioned as a critical catalyst for shifting student perceptions from instrumental compliance to communicative identity.

Collectively, the three pillars convert the identified challenges into actionable design principles. Given current constraints in human resources, student readiness, and linguistic environment at IAI Tihamah, a full immersion model is not yet viable. The study therefore recommends a phased partial-immersion approach combined with content-based instruction, beginning with 50 percent Arabic-mediated instruction in selected courses and progressive expansion of Arabic-speaking zones. This staged trajectory acknowledges institutional realities while preserving the long-term vision of an Arabic-speaking academic culture, and it offers a transferable yet context-sensitive framework for other developing Islamic higher education institutions seeking to reorient Arabic as a living medium of scholarly identity.

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that an effective reorientation of Arabic language learning at IAI Tihamah requires the design of an integrative immersion model built upon three interdependent pillars – curricular immersion, co-curricular immersion, and institutional language policy – explicitly derived from the empirically identified challenges of program fragmentation, absent language zoning, and instrumental student perceptions. Theoretically, the model advances immersion scholarship by synthesizing comprehensible-input, interactionist, and sociocultural perspectives into an ecological framework tailored to the religious-cultural functions of Arabic in Islamic higher education, thereby positioning the language as both a medium of knowledge construction and a constitutive element of institutional academic identity. Practically, the phased partial-immersion approach, commencing with approximately 50 percent Arabic-mediated instruction and progressive expansion of Arabic-speaking zones, offers a feasible pathway for developing Islamic higher education institutions to cultivate a sustainable linguistic ecosystem that enhances communicative competence while strengthening institutional distinctiveness.

Nevertheless, the study is limited by its single-institution focus and reliance on qualitative data from one developing PTKI context, which constrains the generalizability of the proposed model across more resourced or culturally divergent settings. Future research should therefore conduct multi-site comparative evaluations of the three-pillar framework, incorporate longitudinal measures of linguistic and identity outcomes, and examine the interplay between institutional language policy and broader national Arabic-language agendas to refine and scale the model for wider application in Islamic higher education.

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