Living the Language: Self-Regulated Arabic Usage among Pesantren University Students in Indonesia

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Abstract

Keywords:
Digital immersion;
Indonesia;
Islamic higher education;
language immersion;
Learner autonomy;
Pesantren.

Arabic language education in pesantren-based Islamic universities increasingly emphasizes self-regulated learning to encourage authentic language use beyond formal classrooms. However, empirical evidence on how learners independently sustain Arabic across social, academic, and digital domains remains limited, particularly in Islamic higher education contexts. This study examines the extent of self-regulated Arabic usage and identifies motivational, social, and digital factors supporting learner autonomy among university students in Indonesia. Using a convergent mixed-methods design, data were collected from 60 undergraduate students at *Darullughah Wadda'wah* International Islamic University, a pesantren-based institution in Pasuruan, East Java, Indonesia, through questionnaires, interviews, and observations. The findings reveal that 65% of students use Arabic daily in informal interaction, religious activities, and digital communication. Advanced learners show higher autonomous engagement (78.6%) compared to intermediate (64.0%) and beginner students (52.4%). Integrative motivation, peer support, and engagement with Arabic digital religious content significantly predict independent language use, while spontaneous oral production remains the main challenge. The study concludes that Arabic functions as a lived linguistic, academic, and spiritual identity practice in pesantren-based Islamic higher education. Practically, it recommends strengthening peer-supported language immersion and Arabic-based digital environments to sustain learner autonomy beyond classroom instruction.

Abstrak

Kata kunci
Indonesia;
Imersi Bahasa;
Imersi Digital;
Kemandirian Pembelajar;
Pendidikan Tinggi Islam;
Pesantren.

Pendidikan bahasa Arab di perguruan tinggi Islam berbasis pesantren semakin menekankan self-regulated learning untuk mendorong penggunaan bahasa Arab secara autentik di luar kelas formal. Namun, bukti empiris mengenai bagaimana mahasiswa mempertahankan penggunaan bahasa Arab secara mandiri dalam ranah sosial, akademik, dan digital masih terbatas, khususnya dalam konteks pendidikan tinggi Islam. Penelitian ini mengkaji tingkat penggunaan bahasa Arab berbasis regulasi diri serta mengidentifikasi faktor motivasional, sosial, dan digital yang mendukung kemandirian berbahasa mahasiswa di Indonesia. Dengan desain mixed-methods konvergen, data dikumpulkan dari 60 mahasiswa strata satu di Universitas Islam Internasional *Darullughah Wadda'wah*, Pasuruan,

Jawa Timur, Indonesia, melalui angket, wawancara, dan observasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa 65% mahasiswa menggunakan bahasa Arab setiap hari dalam interaksi informal, aktivitas keagamaan, dan komunikasi digital. Mahasiswa tingkat lanjut menunjukkan keterlibatan otonom yang lebih tinggi (78,6%) dibandingkan tingkat menengah (64,0%) dan pemula (52,4%). Motivasi integratif, dukungan teman sebaya, serta konsumsi konten digital keislaman berbahasa Arab menjadi prediktor signifikan, sementara tuturan spontan masih menjadi tantangan utama. Secara praktis, penelitian ini merekomendasikan penguatan imersi bahasa berbasis sebaya dan pengembangan lingkungan digital berbahasa Arab untuk menopang kemandirian belajar.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Arabic language education in pesantren-based universities in Indonesia has undergone a significant shift toward promoting self-regulated learning and authentic language use in daily life (Habib, 2025; Muhith & Batrisya, 2026; Mukhasibi & Wahyudi, 2026; Surur et al., 2024). *Pesantren-based universities* refer to Islamic higher education institutions that integrate the traditional Indonesian pesantren (Islamic boarding school) system with formal university structures. In this model, students reside in dormitory-based religious communities where Arabic is not only taught as an academic subject but also practiced as a daily language for religious activities, peer interaction, and campus life (Fauzah, 2025; Lazuardi, 2025; Musthofa et al., 2025; Zarkasi, 2025). This unique institutional ecology positions Arabic as both a scholarly and spiritual medium, extending language learning beyond classroom instruction into lived social practice (Nasution et al., 2025; Setiawan et al., 2024). Although formal instruction and structured curricula provide a solid linguistic foundation, not all students are able to independently apply Arabic outside the classroom. Many learners demonstrate strong theoretical mastery yet lack confidence and fluency when speaking Arabic naturally in casual conversations, academic discussions, and social interactions (Huda et al., 2026; Julianti et al., 2022; Syaheed & Salam, 2026). This raises a critical question: are students truly living the language, or is Arabic learning still confined to formal and structured activities?

Recent scholarship increasingly emphasizes self-regulated learning (SRL) as a core competency in modern language education. Brenner (2022) highlights that SRL practices support metacognition, motivation, and strategic action, strengthening learners'

autonomy across academic and social dimensions. Fan et al. (2025) further show that human–AI collaboration influences SRL processes and performance, though AI support may reduce cognitive effort and foster dependence. In second-language contexts, Teng (2024) demonstrates that motivational beliefs and self-efficacy significantly predict SRL strategies, confirming the role of intrinsic goals and task value in sustaining linguistic persistence. In technology-enhanced settings, Kong and Yang (2024) introduce a human-centered AI-supported learning model that enhances attention, engagement, feedback, and reflection while preserving the teacher's role as facilitator. Complementing these findings, Munshi et al. (2023) reveal that adaptive scaffolding aids SRL development by providing context-sensitive guidance at critical learning moments, especially in open-ended learning environments. Collectively, these studies affirm that SRL emerges from a synergy of motivation, autonomy, scaffolding, and digital mediation.

Although existing studies substantively advance the understanding of SRL, most research remains situated in secular higher-education or K–12 contexts, focusing primarily on cognitive-technological dynamics rather than faith-based learning environments. Little is known about how SRL is cultivated within pesantren-based Islamic universities, where religious values, communal norms, and bi'ah lughawiyyah interact with digital media exposure to shape autonomous Arabic usage. Moreover, prior studies largely examine classroom-bound SRL interventions, overlooking how students independently sustain target-language practices across social, academic, and spiritual spaces. Therefore, this study addresses a critical gap by investigating self-regulated Arabic use as a lived linguistic practice in a pesantren-university ecosystem, integrating spiritual motivation, peer culture, and digital engagement as unique drivers of language autonomy.

In this study, self-regulated Arabic usage refers to learners' capacity to autonomously apply Arabic in authentic social, academic, and digital contexts beyond formal instructional settings. This concept emphasizes the independent use of Arabic for real-life communication such as informal interaction, religious discourse, academic engagement, and digital communication rather than the regulation of classroom-based learning strategies alone. While self-regulated learning involves planning, monitoring, and evaluating learning processes, self-regulated Arabic usage focuses on spontaneous and intentional language deployment as part of everyday practice. In pesantren-based

university settings, this distinction is particularly salient, as Arabic functions not only as an academic subject but also as a lived scholarly and spiritual language embedded in daily campus life (Albantani et al., 2022; Halim et al., 2023; Munapi et al., 2025; Segaf Baharun & Arisandi, 2025). In pesantren university settings, students are expected to exhibit a relatively high level of self-regulated Arabic use, as Arabic functions not only as an academic medium but also as a principal scholarly and spiritual language. Prior literature emphasizes that SRL is strongly associated with learner motivation, and this relationship has been widely discussed across educational contexts. Accordingly, this study is guided by two analytical expectations. First, pesantren university students are expected to demonstrate a relatively high level of self-regulated Arabic usage due to sustained exposure to Arabic in academic and religious contexts. Second, students' motivation toward Arabic learning is expected to be positively associated with their autonomous Arabic usage.

This study seeks to address two primary research questions: (1) To what extent do pesantren university students independently use Arabic in their daily lives? (2) What motivational, social, and digital factors influence their self-regulated Arabic use? The scope of this research includes students' Arabic usage across three domains: social interaction, academic engagement, and digital communication within a pesantren-based university environment. The study's limitations include its focus on a single institution and reliance on self-reported perceptions, which may introduce subjective bias.

The findings of this research are expected to contribute theoretically by strengthening the discourse on self-regulated language learning within Islamic higher education, and practically by offering recommendations for designing digital-collaborative bi'ah lughawiyyah models that promote Arabic autonomy. Furthermore, this study fills a research gap by comparing formal instructional exposure with organically emerging language practices. Thus, it not only validates the role of autonomous learning strategies in Arabic pedagogy but also highlights the potential of pesantren as a dynamic bilingual ecosystem in the digital era.

METHOD

This study involved exactly 60 undergraduate students enrolled at *Darullughah Wadda'wah* International Islamic University, Pasuruan, East Java, Indonesia. A purposive

sampling strategy was applied to capture variation in academic level and prior Arabic exposure within the pesantren-based university environment (Memon et al., 2024). Inclusion criteria comprised active undergraduate enrollment, residence in campus dormitories for at least one academic semester, and regular exposure to Arabic in academic or non-academic contexts. Exchange students, part-time students, and those without dormitory residency were excluded because they did not fully participate in the pesantren linguistic ecology. Academic level was operationalized by semester grouping—beginner (semesters 2–3), intermediate (semesters 4–5), and advanced (semesters 6–8) while language background was categorized based on prior educational experience (pesantren versus non-pesantren schooling). All 60 distributed questionnaires were returned and validated, resulting in a 100% response rate.

Quantitative data were collected using a self-developed questionnaire consisting of 32 items, measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = never, 5 = always) (Creswell & Creswell, 2020). The instrument comprised four subscales: autonomous Arabic use in social contexts, academic Arabic use, digital Arabic engagement, and motivational orientation toward Arabic usage, each represented by eight items. Prior to administration, the questionnaire was reviewed by two experts in Arabic language education and piloted with 15 students outside the main sample. Reliability analysis yielded a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.87, indicating satisfactory internal consistency. Qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with 10 students (Belina, 2023), selected from the survey respondents using maximum variation sampling based on academic level and reported frequency of Arabic use, as well as interviews with three Arabic language instructors serving as key informants. Interview protocols explored contexts of autonomous Arabic use, motivational and affective factors, peer and institutional support, and challenges in spontaneous language production. In addition, non-participant observations were conducted in dormitories, classrooms, mosques, and informal social spaces to document naturally occurring Arabic interactions using an observation checklist. Methodological rigor was ensured through triangulation of survey data (Azizah et al., 2024; Campbell et al., 2020), interview narratives, and observational notes, while credibility and dependability were strengthened through transparent documentation of instruments and procedures.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Extent of Self-Regulated Arabic Usage

The findings indicate that students demonstrate a substantial level of self-regulated Arabic usage beyond formal classroom instruction. Of the 60 respondents, 65% (n = 39) reported using Arabic on a daily basis, 28.3% (n = 17) reported occasional use (two to three times per week), and only 6.7% (n = 4) reported using Arabic primarily within classroom settings. Daily usage predominantly occurred in informal peer interaction, religious activities, and digital communication within dormitory and campus environments. This distribution suggests that Arabic functions as a routinely enacted language rather than a purely instructional subject in the pesantren-based university context.

Domain-based analysis further illustrates variation in autonomous usage across contexts. Arabic use was most frequent in religious practices (M = 4.12, SD = 0.76), followed by informal social interaction (M = 3.82, SD = 0.91), digital communication (M = 3.67, SD = 1.04), and academic activities (M = 3.45, SD = 0.88). Spontaneous oral conversation showed the lowest mean score (M = 3.28, SD = 1.12), indicating that while Arabic is widely used, unrehearsed spoken production remains relatively challenging.

Self-Regulated Language Use by Academic Level and Background

Independent samples analysis revealed significant differences in autonomous Arabic usage based on students' educational background and academic level. Students with pesantren educational backgrounds demonstrated significantly higher levels of self-regulated Arabic use (M = 3.89, SD = 0.72) compared to those from general school backgrounds (M = 3.28, SD = 0.86), $t(58) = 3.24$, $p = 0.002$. A one-way ANOVA further showed a significant effect of academic level on Arabic usage, $F(2,57) = 8.65$, $p < 0.001$. Post-hoc Tukey tests indicated that advanced students (semesters 6–8; M = 4.18, SD = 0.68) reported significantly higher autonomous usage than intermediate (M = 3.76, SD = 0.75) and beginner students (M = 3.42, SD = 0.89). These results confirm that both sustained exposure to pesantren environments and academic progression contribute to increased learner autonomy in Arabic use.

Motivational and Social Factors Supporting Learner Autonomy

Motivational analysis demonstrates that students possess strong internal orientations toward Arabic usage. Integrative motivation recorded the highest mean

score (M = 4.25, SD = 0.68), followed by intrinsic motivation (M = 3.95, SD = 0.73) and instrumental motivation (M = 3.88, SD = 0.79). Extrinsic motivation showed comparatively lower but still moderate levels (M = 3.42, SD = 0.96). These results indicate that Arabic is perceived primarily as part of students' religious, scholarly, and personal identity rather than merely an academic requirement.

Social environmental factors further reinforced autonomous language use. The pesantren environment exerted a very strong positive influence (M = 4.08, SD = 0.71), while peer support and informal correction (M = 3.92, SD = 0.85) and lecturer facilitation (M = 3.74, SD = 0.88) also played significant roles. These findings highlight the importance of communal norms and shared linguistic responsibility in sustaining everyday Arabic use.

Patterns of Digital Arabic Exposure

Students' autonomous Arabic usage was also supported by regular engagement with Arabic digital media (Hadawiyah et al., 2025; Luthfi & Munir, 2021; Nafi'ah & Setiyawan, 2024). Digital exposure primarily occurred through WhatsApp and Telegram text and voice messaging, YouTube Arabic religious lectures and educational channels, and Instagram-based Arabic learning content. These platforms were used mainly for religious learning, informal discussion, and vocabulary enrichment rather than formal assessment-oriented study. Mean frequency scores indicate that video-based religious and educational content was accessed more frequently than purely textual sources, suggesting that audiovisual input plays a central role in sustaining Arabic engagement in daily life.

Rather than functioning as a direct measure of language proficiency, digital media served as a contextual exposure mechanism that supported continuity of Arabic use outside classroom settings.

Predictors of Independent Arabic Usage

To identify key predictors of autonomous Arabic usage, a multiple regression analysis was conducted. The model explained 54% of the variance in independent Arabic usage (R^2 = 0.54, Adjusted R^2 = 0.51, F(4,55) = 16.12, $p < 0.001$). Integrative motivation emerged as the strongest predictor (β = 0.38, $p < 0.001$), followed by peer support (β = 0.27, $p < 0.01$) and digital Arabic exposure (β = 0.24, $p < 0.05$). The pesantren

environment variable did not reach statistical significance when entered simultaneously, suggesting that its influence may be mediated through motivation and peer interaction.

These findings confirm that autonomous Arabic usage is driven primarily by internalized motivation and socially supported practice, with digital engagement functioning as a complementary facilitator.

Arabic as a Lived Practice

Interview and observational data corroborate the quantitative findings by illustrating how Arabic is enacted as a lived linguistic practice. Students described Arabic use as an expression of religious discipline (*adab*), communal belonging, and academic identity rather than as a performative classroom requirement. Informal peer correction was widely perceived as supportive rather than evaluative, reducing anxiety and encouraging sustained usage. Digital messaging particularly short text and voice exchanges on WhatsApp and Telegram enabled students to maintain Arabic interaction in low-pressure contexts, bridging formal instruction and everyday communication (Kholil et al., 2024).

These results correspond with self-regulated learning theory (Zimmerman, 2002), showing that motivated students actively seek authentic exposure beyond classroom instruction. Moreover, the positive emotional climate and spiritual values appeared to reduce language anxiety challenging findings in secular contexts where fear of mistakes is a barrier (Horwitz, 1986).

The findings reveal that pesantren-based university students are not merely acquiring Arabic but inhabiting it as a cultural, academic, and spiritual identity practice. Independent Arabic engagement thrives when internal motivation intersects with supportive peer culture and accessible digital Islamic content. This supports contemporary perspectives that successful language autonomy emerges from meaningful identity alignment, not simply instructional method.

Moreover, the data suggest a shift in the nature of Arabic immersion in pesantren universities from traditional teacher-centered enforcement toward collaborative, digitally mediated self-directed practice. This hybrid immersion environment peer-driven, spiritually anchored, and digitally enriched expands conventional Arabic immersion theory.

This study contributes to the growing literature on Arabic pedagogy by demonstrating that pesantren universities cultivate a distinctive model of autonomous language development. Unlike prior research that separates formal learning and informal social exposure, this investigation identifies a spiritual-digital-social triad that shapes student language behavior. Arabic autonomy in this context arises not solely from classroom strategies, but from the interplay of religious identity, peer interaction, and continuous digital input. This reveals a new conceptualization of living the language within Islamic higher education, advancing understanding of how faith-based institutions can foster sustainable linguistic independence in the era of global digital connectivity.

The findings of this study reaffirm that Arabic within a pesantren-university setting is not merely an academic requirement, but a lived linguistic and spiritual identity practice. The fact that a majority of students reported daily autonomous use reflects the core principle of *self-regulated learning*, in which learners plan, monitor, and evaluate their language actions beyond classroom structures (Zimmerman, 2002). The prominent use of metacognitive strategies resonates with Halim et al. (2023), who emphasize that conscious self-correction and goal planning are essential to cultivating spoken fluency in a second-language context.

Motivation emerged as the most influential driver of independent Arabic usage particularly integrative and spiritual motivation, as students perceive Arabic as both a scholarly language and a sacred gateway to Islamic knowledge. This aligns with Teng (2024), who notes that intrinsic beliefs and academic purpose significantly strengthen SRL behaviors. In this context, motivation is not only cognitive but deeply affective and value-laden, echoing Brenner's (2022) argument that meaningful personal goals shape autonomous learning pathways.

Peer support was also a strong predictor, reinforcing Vygotsky's sociocultural view that language development flourishes through guided interaction and shared practice (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 1995). Students in this study experienced peer correction as encouragement rather than judgment, a hallmark of pesantren culture that transforms language learning into a communal responsibility and a shared act of growth.

Digital immersion played a notable role: students who frequently engaged with Arabic religious lectures, tafsir content, and conversational media reported higher

confidence and receptive proficiency. This finding aligns with Paradita et al. (2025), who demonstrated that *extensive viewing* enhances vocabulary acquisition and listening comprehension. However, students still reported challenges in spontaneous speech—consistent with Krashen's (1982) assertion that comprehension matures before effortless output, highlighting the continued need for adaptive scaffolding (Munshi et al., 2023).

Collectively, these findings suggest that pesantren-based universities cultivate a distinctive immersion model, one in which spiritual aspiration, supportive peer culture, and digital Arabic environments converge to sustain linguistic autonomy. This hybrid ecology not only validates prior research on SRL in language education (Albantani et al., 2022; Halim et al., 2023), but also extends it by showing how sacred purpose and communal ethos deepen learners' commitment to "living the language." In this context, Arabic learning is not driven by grades or obligation, but by belonging, devotion, and intellectual identity, marking the pesantren as a unique and powerful site of language socialization in the contemporary era.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the extent and determinants of self-regulated Arabic usage among students in a pesantren-based university, revealing that Arabic functions not only as an academic subject but as a lived linguistic and spiritual practice. The findings demonstrate that students engage with Arabic autonomously across social, academic, and digital domains, with motivation strengthened by peer culture, institutional values, and exposure to digital Islamic content. These dynamics affirm the relevance of Self-Regulated Learning Theory, Sociocultural Theory, and input-based language acquisition frameworks in Arabic education within Islamic contexts, while contributing a new insight into the hybrid nature of immersion in pesantren higher education where spiritual aspiration, peer support, and online media jointly sustain language engagement. By illustrating how Arabic becomes embedded in daily identity and campus culture, this study strengthens existing scholarship on autonomous language learning and highlights the unique capacity of pesantren-university ecosystems to nurture sustained linguistic independence.

Despite its contributions, this research is limited to a single institutional setting and self-reported data, which may not fully capture linguistic behavior in broader pesantren-university landscapes. Future research may expand to multi-site comparative studies, incorporate longitudinal observation, and explore neurological or affective dimensions of Arabic autonomy such as inner speech development and emotional regulation in language performance. Practically, the study suggests that pesantren universities can strengthen students' Arabic autonomy by institutionalizing structured peer-support systems, maximizing Arabic-based digital platforms, and designing ecologies that integrate academic rigor with spiritual culture and informal communication. These findings offer strategic implications for language policy and curriculum development in Islamic higher-education settings, while paving the way for further inquiry into living the language as a sustainable model of Arabic pedagogy in the digital era.

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