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Students in Indonesia**

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ARABIC LEARNING AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AMONG NON-MUSLIM STUDENTS IN INDONESIA

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Abstract

The Arabic language is often perceived by some individuals as inherently tied to Islamic teachings, creating a misconception that deters non-Muslims from engaging with it academically. This study addressed this issue by exploring how non-Muslim students constructed their religious identity and developed adaptation strategies while learning Arabic at State Islamic Religious Universities in Indonesia. The research employed a qualitative phenomenological approach, collecting data through in-depth interviews with five Christian students at the State Islamic University of North Sumatra in Medan, and analyzing it using the ATLAS.ti application. The findings revealed that students maintained a strong and unaffected sense of religious identity, as they viewed Arabic not as a spiritual language but as a neutral, international means of communication. Participants adopted various adaptation strategies, such as framing Arabic as knowledge rather than belief, engaging in conformity, experiencing minority privilege, employing peer learning, utilizing environmental resources for knowledge, and reinforcing religious practices within the family. These strategies highlight the dynamic interplay between identity, belief, and academic engagement in a religious educational context, offering new insights into inclusive language learning environments in Islamic institutions.

Keywords: Adaptation Strategies; Arabic Language Learning; Student Identity; Non-Muslim Students.

A. Introduction

Language and culture are deeply interwoven; numerous studies affirm their inseparability. Learning a language involves engaging with the culture of its native speakers (Heath, 2010), as exemplified by Arabic. This resonates with Bayramova (2016), who argues that language and culture are internal systems of humanity. Culture directs human interaction, while language facilitates it (Almutairi, 2015). Whiteley (2017) also views language learning as inherently cultural, contributing to identity formation. Even extinct languages influence the cultural identity of former speakers (Collins, 2021). Language thus becomes a vehicle for expressing core cultural values (Smolicz, 1980).

In the Islamic context, Arabic holds significant religious and cultural meaning. As the language of the Qur'an and Hadith, it is considered sacred and central to religious identity, especially in the Middle East and broader Muslim communities (Boudelaa & Marslen-Wilson, 2013). Many view Arabic as Allah's chosen language, integral to Islamic worship and practice and the interpretation of Islamic tenets (Asari, 2019; Ikbal et al., 2024; Khairiyah, 2020; Sauri, 2020).

In Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim-majority country, Arabic is widely taught in Islamic institutions (Asari & Abidin, 2020; Ritonga et al., 2020). However, it is also introduced in secular contexts, including universities and public schools, where it functions as a foreign language (Nasution et al., 2024; Pikri, 2022). This dual presence of Arabic, in both Islamic and secular educational systems, creates a unique sociolinguistic landscape in Indonesia.

Despite its religious association, Arabic is globally positioned as a foreign language. Yet, its link to Islam often generates ambivalence among non-Muslim learners. Bahhari (2023) notes that while Arabic's preservation is tied to religion, it is not exclusive to religious identity. Singh et al., (2021) argue that Arabic is comparable to other foreign languages, while Wahba et al., (2017) see non-Muslim Arabic learners as pivotal to its internationalization. Thus,

Arabic's religious connection does not universally hinder its study (Aladdin, 2013). Studies in Scandinavia support this, indicating that Islam is not the main driver for Arabic learning (Calafato, 2020).

Nevertheless, perceptions persist. Jaspal & Coyle (2010) found that for many, studying Arabic symbolizes learning about Islam. This raises critical questions about how non-Muslim students negotiate religious identity in Arabic language contexts. Arabic education inevitably transmits Islamic values embedded within Arab culture (Dajani et al., 2014; Whiteley, 2017), reinforcing Bayramova's (2016) assertion of the strong interlinkage between language and culture. Furthermore, education shapes personal and spiritual identity (Parlindungan & Rodgers, 2023), especially when learners engage with sacred texts.

This implies that for non-Muslim students, learning Arabic entails negotiation of religious and cultural identity boundaries. Their experience may involve complex adaptation not only to the linguistic content but also to the environment—teachers, peers, and institutional norms (Jaspal & Coyle, 2010; Aladdin, 2010; Nasution et al., 2024). This is especially relevant when Arabic is taught within Islamic higher education settings, where the language is often embedded with symbolic religious meanings that may not align with the learners' own belief systems (Ritonga et al., 2023; Gokaru et al., 2024). Such dynamics underscore the need for pedagogical approaches that are inclusive and sensitive to the diverse identities present in the classroom.

Previous research has explored non-Muslim engagement with Arabic learning. Jaspal and Coyle (2010) examined identity dynamics among South Asian youth in Britain, while Aladdin (2010, 2013) studied the motivation and attitudes of non-Muslim Malaysians at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Jumadi and Masithoh (2023) investigated lecturers' support for non-Muslims at Muhammadiyah Sorong University. Wekke and Suhendar (2016) found that sustained motivation aids Muslim minorities in North Sulawesi. Meanwhile, Arifin et al., (2020) analyzed classroom and extracurricular strategies for Arabic learning. While these



studies provide valuable insights into learners' motivation and external support, they largely overlook the internal processes of identity negotiation and the nuanced adaptation strategies that non-Muslim students must develop when learning Arabic in institutions where the language is closely embedded with Islamic religious values. There remains a gap in understanding how these students reconcile their personal faith commitments with the religiously framed pedagogy of Arabic education in Islamic universities.

This study seeks to bridge that gap by explicitly examining two interconnected dimensions: (1) the formation and negotiation of religious identity among non-Muslim students during Arabic learning, and (2) the adaptation strategies they employ to manage this experience within Islamic higher education institutions. These objectives provide an essential lens for understanding how inclusive and religiously pluralistic pedagogical practices can be developed in Arabic language instruction. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on identity resilience rather than transformation, and on pragmatic adaptation rather than ideological assimilation—perspectives that remain understudied within Arabic language pedagogy, especially in the Indonesian context.

Moreover, this research contributes not only to localized curricular reform in Indonesian Islamic universities (PTKIN) but also to the broader theoretical discourse on language, religion, and minority identity. While much of the literature treats identity as fluid and subject to change in immersive environments, this study foregrounds the agency of learners in asserting religious boundaries within institutional spaces coded with majority faith norms. By positioning Arabic as a site of academic engagement rather than religious conversion, the study challenges essentialist assumptions linking sacred languages with ideological conformity. This reframing is particularly relevant to the global challenge of developing language instruction models that respect faith plurality while maintaining pedagogical integrity.

Hence, the study addresses the following research questions: (1) How do non-Muslim students perceive and negotiate their religious identity in the context of Arabic language learning? (2) What strategies do they employ to adapt to Arabic instruction embedded within Islamic institutional environments?

Through these questions, the study aims to contribute empirically to Arabic language education by offering a grounded understanding of identity and adaptation and by informing curriculum design that promotes religious moderation and inclusivity within State Islamic Religious Higher Education Institutions (PTKIN) in Indonesia.

B. Method

This study utilized a qualitative-phenomenological approach, which aims to describe individuals lived experiences in a specific social context. The methodology of the phenomenological study was related to several approaches, which in turn were applied to individual cases or carefully selected samples (Greening, 2019, Polkinghorne, 1989, Wu & Volker, 2009, Henry et al., 2008). An object to be revealed in this study was how the religious identity and adaptation strategies of non-Muslim students in learning Arabic were perceived.

This approach was chosen to explore how non-Muslim students experience religious identity and adaptation strategies when learning Arabic in an Islamic university context. Rather than elaborating on general phenomenological theory, this study applied phenomenological analysis directly to lived narratives gathered from participants.

This study involved five Christian non-Muslim students, selected through purposive sampling, from two faculties: Public Health (3) and Science and Technology (2). Inclusion criteria included active status, past or current Arabic study, and consent to participate. Gender and faculty diversity were considered to ensure selection validity. Informal member-checking ensured the accuracy and coherence of self-reports, enhancing the credibility of participant perspectives. The demographic details are shown in Table 1.



Table 1. Participant demographic data

Participant	Gender	Age	Religion	Semester	Experience in learning Arabic (years)
P1	Male	20 years	Protestant Christian	3	≤1
P2	Female	20 years	Protestant Christian	3	≤1
P3	Female	19 years	Protestant Christian	1	≤1
P4	Male	20 years	Protestant Christian	3	≤1
P5	Female	19 years	Catholic Christian	1	≤1

Data collection was carried out through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interview guide consisted of seven core open-ended questions, such as: “How has learning Arabic influenced your religious identity?” and “What strategies do you use to adapt in Arabic classes with Muslim peers and instructors?” The interviews also explored experiences with Arabic content, interaction with Muslim instructors and peers, campus culture, and family environment adaptation. A closed questionnaire was followed to capture participants’ perceptions of Arabic language learning.

Data were analyzed using ATLAS.ti9. Verbatim transcripts were uploaded, and open coding identified key phrases, later grouped into categories for axial coding. Seven main themes emerged through iterative coding and peer discussion. Validation involved participant frequency tracking and supporting quotations. Co-occurrence analysis revealed inter-theme relationships, forming a conceptual map of religious identity and adaptation. Credibility was ensured through source triangulation, participant confirmation, and cross-checks between interviews and questionnaires. An audit trail and reflective notes supported transparency. The final analysis included visual representations (diagrams/ tables), with conclusions drawn by comparing results against existing literature to ensure analytical rigor.

C. Results and Discussion

This section presents the key findings on the identity and adaptation strategies of non-Muslim students learning Arabic in Indonesia, followed by a critical discussion to explore their experiences within the broader social, cultural, and educational contexts.

1. Results

This section presented findings regarding how non-Muslim students formed or maintained their identity as non-Muslims and the adaptation strategies applied in learning Arabic at Islamic universities. The summary of findings is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of finding

No.	Variable	Finding
1.	Religious Identity	Remaining Resilient and Unwavering by: a. Promoting Arabic as a global language; b. Fostering pride in learning it for economic and religious insights; and c. Strengthening commitment to personal religious practices.
2.	Adaptation Strategy	a. Reframing Arabic as Knowledge; b. Respectful Compliance as a Form of Adaptation; c. Peer-Based Learning and Social Bonding as Informal Strategy; and d. Engaging Campus Environment While Respecting Religious Boundaries.

a. Religious identity remains stable in a muslim academic environment

The first theme identifies how non-Muslim students maintained their religious identity despite studying Islamic-related content such as Arabic. Participants shared consistent perspectives that Arabic was a language of knowledge rather than belief, enabling them to engage academically without religious conflict.

All participants explained that their identity as non-Muslim in learning Arabic at Islamic universities was not disturbed at all and remained unchanged. According to them, as students in Islamic

universities, learning Arabic was an obligation, regardless of their religious background. Participants collectively framed their engagement with Arabic as part of academic obligations rather than religious transformation, a theme that consistently emerged across narratives.

This phenomenon suggests a high degree of agency among non-Muslim students in defining their religious boundaries while fulfilling academic responsibilities. It reflects the ability to negotiate personal identity in an environment where religious and linguistic elements are closely intertwined.

Non-Muslim students were required to participate in Arabic language learning just like other students, and it was assumed that learning Arabic was similar to learning any other language, even though it was related to the Islamic religion. This perception allowed participants to maintain a boundary between language acquisition and religious identity. P4 stated.

"Learning Arabic does not affect my Christian identity. Initially linked to Islam, I now see it as an international language. I embrace it as a campus requirement and take pride in its rarity among non-Muslims, enhancing my language skills". (P4, Male, Protestant student, 3rd Semester, Faculty of Science and Technology, In-person interview, September 20, 2023).

P3 supported this.

"I will not convert from Christianity despite studying Arabic and Islamic subjects. My family, non-Muslim, was concerned when I wore a hijab at college, but I clarified it is only worn on campus, not elsewhere". (P3, Female, Protestant student, 1st Semester, Faculty of Public Health, In-person interview, September 21, 2023).

This illustrates the theme that religious identity was not only preserved but also actively defended by maintaining clear internal and external boundaries between academic obligation and personal faith. Moreover, such resistance to religious influence implies sophisticated identity management, wherein students utilize symbolic behaviors (e.g., wearing a hijab temporarily) as part of situational conformity without altering their core beliefs.

Another sub-theme that emerged was the role of family. Family influence appeared as both a concern and a guiding force in the identity stability of students. For example, P2 stated.

"I follow my parents' advice to adapt to campus rules without religious conversion. I remain committed to their wishes while studying at UIN, recognizing the university offers valuable career opportunities". (P2, Female, Protestant student, 3rd Semester, Faculty of Public Health, In-person interview, September 20, 2023).

Thus, the theme of identity preservation is closely linked with family expectations, which acted as a compass guiding participants' adaptation in religiously nuanced spaces. This further suggests that identity maintenance is not merely personal but socially reinforced, particularly through family narratives that frame Arabic learning as a pragmatic rather than spiritual engagement.

These accounts confirm that non-Muslim students exercised strong agency in protecting their religious identity. To avoid tension, they put aside the religious elements of Arabic and perceived it solely as an academic requirement. Moreover, identity maintenance is socially anchored—particularly within family support systems, which acts as a compass guiding behavior in a religiously infused academic environment.

b. Adaptation strategies rooted in pragmatism and social integration

This theme identifies adaptive strategies used by non-Muslim students that allowed them to navigate Arabic language learning effectively, including redefining Arabic as secular knowledge, complying with institutional expectations, and leveraging peer support.

1) Reframing Arabic as knowledge

Participants consistently emphasized that Arabic was viewed purely as knowledge, disconnected from its dominant association with Islam. Through thematic analysis, two interconnected sub-themes emerged within this strategy: academic neutrality and utilitarian orientation.

The first sub-theme, academic neutrality, was expressed in how participants framed Arabic similarly to other general academic subjects. For example, P2 reflected that their family encouraged them to.

"My parents encouraged me to follow and learn all courses for knowledge, not necessarily for faith, as religious belief depends on each individual". (P2, Female, Protestant student, 3rd Semester, Faculty of Public Health, In-person interview, September 20, 2023).

P4 stated.

"My parents supported my Arabic studies, viewing it as valuable knowledge. They believe learning Arabic is not prohibited by all religions and offers opportunities, such as working in Arab countries since Arabic is a universal language". (P4, Male, Protestant student, 3rd Semester, Faculty of Science and Technology, In-person interview, September 20, 2023).

This statement, when interpreted in the broader context of participant narratives, indicates a pragmatic and non-religious positioning of Arabic. By asserting neutrality, students can separate language acquisition from ideological influence, which serves as a psychological buffer against the perceived Islamisation of knowledge.

Rather than viewing the language as embedded within Islamic identity, participants—especially those from Christian backgrounds—conceptualized Arabic as a domain of academic pursuit. This framing functioned as a psychological distancing technique, allowing them to participate in Arabic classes without perceiving it as a threat to their religious identity. These statements illustrate how Arabic is framed as academic knowledge and skill rather than religious transmission. Students and their families engage in a reinterpretive act—redefining the language as neutral, even beneficial, and therefore non-threatening to religious identity.

Utilitarian orientation relates to the perception of Arabic as a potential tool for future opportunities. P4 described:

"Arabic is a universal language, who knows, there could be an opportunity for you to go to an Arab country". (P4, Male, Protestant student, 3rd Semester, Faculty of Science and Technology, In-person interview, September 20, 2023).

This perspective reinforces the idea that participants did not engage with Arabic for religious integration, but rather saw it as an instrumental asset—a strategic skill that could expand their mobility, both academically and professionally. This utilitarian stance was not isolated; it was echoed across multiple interviews and shaped how students justified their sustained engagement with Arabic language learning. This aligns with global trends where language learning is increasingly tied to employability and internationalization, rather than cultural or religious assimilation.

Together, these sub-themes reveal a broader pattern: students recontextualized Arabic as an academic and global asset, rather than a religious symbol. This redefinition illustrates a critical act of reappropriation, where students negotiate meanings to serve their own goals in an ideologically charged environment. Thus, the strategy to frame Arabic in secular and practical terms directly supports the study's focus on how students preserve their religious identity while adapting to the institutional norms of an Islamic university.

2) Respectful compliance as a form of adaptation

One prominent theme that emerged from the thematic analysis of interview data is the strategy of academic compliance, wherein non-Muslim students adapt to Arabic language lecturers by closely adhering to classroom expectations. This theme was developed through open coding of recurring expressions related to students' responses to lecturers' instructions, followed by axial coding to link these responses to broader patterns of adaptation.

For instance, several participants emphasized the importance of following instructions as a conscious effort to maintain harmony in a Muslim-majority academic setting. Rather than interpreting this behavior as passive submission, it was evident that students used compliance as a strategic adaptation mechanism to avoid potential conflict and to succeed academically. This strategy reflects what can be described as “cultural diplomacy”, where students exercise respect as a form of negotiation and peaceful coexistence. P5 shared.



"I just follow the system; when the lecturer gives an assignment, I do it, when the schedule comes in, I go in according to the time". (P5, Female, Catholic student, 1st Semester, Faculty of Science and Technology, In-person interview, September 21, 2023).

This response reflects a pragmatic orientation—following academic protocols not out of coercion, but as a rational response to institutional expectations. Similarly, P1 stated.

"I just follow the system, Sir. If the professor assigns a task, I do it; if it is time to attend class, I attend on time, Sir. Whatever the professor directs, I follow it completely. Whatever the professor directs, I follow it completely". (P1, Male, Protestant student, 3rd Semester, Faculty of Public Health, In-person interview, September 20, 2023).

When considered together, such statements reveal a pattern of behavior in which students intentionally integrate into the academic structure while maintaining their personal identity boundaries.

This theme — "compliance as adaptation" — also illustrates how non-Muslim students tactfully navigate the learning environment without attempting to challenge or transform it. By analyzing these statements within their context, it becomes clear that students perceive alignment with lecturers' guidance as a non-confrontational path toward academic success and social acceptance. Moreover, compliance is not merely about obedience but a strategic move to minimize exposure to religious content while maximizing academic performance.

Concerning the focus of this research, which investigates both identity preservation and adaptation strategies, this theme demonstrates that non-Muslim students do not compromise their religious identity, but instead develop practical strategies to engage with the Islamic academic setting. Their compliance is selective and bounded—it applies to academic processes but does not extend to religious conformity. It is a form of situational adaptation, designed to maintain academic performance while minimizing ideological conflict.

3) *Peer-based learning and social bonding as an informal strategy*

In every learning process, both inside and outside the classroom, non-Muslim students always communicate with Muslim classmates and ask their classmates more often than they ask the professors. As a result, the majority of participants felt dependent on their Muslim friends. P3 said:

"I often ask my friends and my friends want to teach me, maybe because I am alone in class, every time the lecturer gives an assignment in class, I ask my friends to provide information, so that I understand the instructions". (P3, Female, Protestant student, 1st Semester, Faculty of Public Health, In-person interview, September 21, 2023).

This illustrates how non-Muslim students reconfigured their Muslim peers as 'learning allies'—a critical informal support system that reduced cultural distance while enabling successful adaptation. It also highlights the emergence of peer solidarity that transcends religious boundaries, fostering inclusive micro-environments within larger exclusive systems.

P4 mentioned similar experiences.

"I often ask my friends and my friends are willing to teach me, maybe because I am alone in class, every time the lecturer gives an assignment in class, I ask my friends to provide information, so that I understand the instructions". (P4, Male, Protestant student, 3rd Semester, Faculty of Science and Technology, In-person interview, September 20, 2023).

Social bonds thus functioned as cultural and educational bridges in navigating Arabic learning. These informal learning networks not only support academic adaptation but also serve as psychological buffers against feelings of religious isolation. The account provided by P3 illustrates that non-Muslim students' adaptation to Arabic language learning extends beyond individual effort and is deeply embedded in social interactions within the classroom environment. Reliance on Muslim peers emerges as a critical coping strategy that facilitates not only comprehension of instructional content but also emotional security in a religiously distinct academic setting. This peer-oriented approach indicates that successful adaptation is, to a large extent, socially mediated.

Similarly, P4's experiences reinforce the pattern that Muslim classmates serve as informal yet indispensable learning partners. This dynamic suggests the formation of a hybrid learning community, wherein non-Muslim students actively participate without being compelled to conform religiously. Such social strategies also reflect implicit interreligious understanding, where cooperation and mutual respect become the foundation for academic progress.

The strategic use of peer relationships reflects a form of contextual intelligence, enabling participants to bridge cultural and religious boundaries while preserving their identities. These patterns underscore that social integration, rather than religious assimilation, is central to their adaptive strategies in Islamic academic environments. Peer-based strategies function as social capital, providing both instructional clarity and emotional support. They create safe zones within the broader religious framework, enabling cross-religious collaboration without coercion or conversion.

4) *Engaging campus environment while respecting religious boundaries*

As part of their adaptation strategies, participants in this study utilized the Islamic university environment as a resource for learning Arabic, while opting to engage only in aspects unrelated to religious practice. By following the established academic rules, they were able to feel accepted and manage their academic activities more smoothly without feeling pressured by the religious dimensions of the environment. P3 stated.

"I just follow all the rules, such as rules regarding visiting the library, language laboratories, etc. So that my classes can run smoothly". (P3, Female, Protestant student, 1st Semester, Faculty of Public Health, In-person interview, September 21, 2023).

This statement reflects how non-Muslim students view university regulations as a "shield" that allows them to adapt to the Islamic environment without being disturbed by religious aspects that might challenge their religious identity. Similarly, P1 remarked:

"I just follow all the rules... so that my courses can run smoothly". (P1, Male, Protestant student, 3rd Semester, Faculty of Public Health, In-person interview, September 20, 2023)

This underscores that the university's regulations, which are not directly related to worship, serve as a means for them to function optimally within the academic context.

From an analytical standpoint, this theme demonstrates that non-Muslim students choose to "normalize" their presence at an Islamic university by adhering to academic regulations that are universal and applicable to all students, regardless of religious background. They choose to focus on their academic goals without getting involved in the religious aspects, which in turn helps them maintain their religious identity.

This process is an example of thematic analysis used to identify patterns in how non-Muslim students face and navigate a predominantly Muslim academic environment. Through this analysis, it becomes evident that their adaptation strategies are primarily pragmatic, focusing on elements that support their academic goals without allowing religious aspects to interfere with their understanding of Arabic language learning.

Thus, this finding is directly related to the research focus on how non-Muslim students' adaptation strategies in learning Arabic at an Islamic university enable them to maintain their religious identity while fulfilling their academic obligations. The use of academic regulations as a tool for adapting without touching on religious dimensions highlights the effort of non-Muslim students to balance social integration and protect their identities.

5) Cross-thematic pattern: Integration without assimilation

Ultimately, the findings reveal a central pattern that can be summarized as "Integration Without Religious Assimilation", which forms the core of this study. Non-Muslim students successfully integrated both academically and socially in a Muslim-majority environment without undergoing religious assimilation. This pattern demonstrates their ability to maintain their identity while fulfilling academic obligations. These findings



further reinforce that the adaptation strategies employed by non-Muslim students are not merely passive attitudes, but also reflect an active understanding of the boundaries between the academic sphere and the realm of religious belief.

2. Discussion

This study reveals a notable persistence of religious identity among non-Muslim students learning Arabic in Islamic State Universities (PTKIN) in Indonesia. Contrary to the findings of Parlindungan & Rodgers (2023), who argued that identity is fluid and may shift with sufficient pedagogical support, the participants in this study exhibited identity stability throughout their engagement with Arabic. This phenomenon is not merely the result of individual resilience but is sustained through two systemic factors: (1) strong religious upbringing, and (2) inclusive yet bounded academic spaces that legitimize religious minority status within Islamic higher education.

This finding challenges dominant discourses in identity studies that often presume identity malleability in immersive environments. Rather than fluid transformation, the data suggests a more negotiated resistance—where students affirm pre-existing identities while navigating new academic-religious terrains. This opens possibilities for theorizing identity resilience as a valid counterpart to identity hybridity (Hajaroh et al., 2023). Such findings contribute to ongoing debates in religious studies and educational sociology concerning identity negotiation within majority-minority academic contexts. While religious moderation often centers on Muslim engagement with pluralism, this study flips the lens, examining how non-Muslims internalize moderation within a Muslim-majority institutional framework (Nasution et al., 2024). Participants showed high levels of tolerance and dialogic openness—key indicators of *wasatiyyah* (Aziz et al., 2019; Zhanabergenova & Kairbekov, 2024). The absence of religious dissonance among learners indicates an operational form of religious moderation that is institutional rather than merely rhetorical (Gokaru et al., 2024).

Yet, this harmony may obscure underlying tensions. Alternative interpretations suggest that tolerance exhibited might stem from adaptive silence rather than deep ideological agreement (Amir et al., 2023). Without longitudinal data, it remains unclear whether this tolerance is enduring or situational. Still, such findings underscore the potential for Islamic institutions to foster religious coexistence through structural inclusivity – an implication that merits practical investment in curricular design, student services, and interfaith engagement policies (Hajaroh et al., 2023; Nasution et al., 2024).

The perception of Arabic among participants is particularly revealing. Despite its dominant religious associations, Arabic was not approached as a proselytizing medium. Instead, it was viewed as a global language of diplomacy, economics, and academia – a view consistent with Singh et al. (2021) and supported by the language’s UN recognition and widespread global use. This reframing aligns with Ritonga et al. (2023) and Mansor et al. (2018), who argued for Arabic’s repositioning within the discourse of global Islam and inclusive religious education. Thus, Arabic here functions not only as a religious-symbolic language but as a site of cosmopolitan engagement, contributing to the literature on language as a tool of intercultural literacy (Kim, 2020; Gokaru et al., 2024).

This reframing deserves deeper exploration. While functional views of Arabic provide pragmatic motivation, the symbolic weight of the language remains context-dependent. A limitation of this study is the lack of comparative data from students in non-Islamic institutions or other religious groups. Nevertheless, these findings highlight a curricular opportunity: Arabic instruction can – and perhaps should – be decoupled from rigid religio-centric frameworks to expand its relevance and reach (Ritonga et al., 2024). Such repositioning could inform language policy, textbook development, and teacher training programs (Zhanabergenova & Kairbekov, 2024).

At a pedagogical level, these findings highlight the urgent need to reconceptualize Arabic instruction beyond rote memorization or religious exclusivity. Following Covington (2000) and Albert (1999), intrinsic



motivation in language learning increases when learners see the language as socially meaningful and personally empowering. In this case, non-Muslim learners were motivated not by religious alignment, but by symbolic capital: Arabic was perceived as “rare”, prestigious, and a sign of intellectual adaptability. This form of pride, as noted by Grytsenko (2021) and MacDonald et al., (2015), often anchors language learning among minority communities and serves as a self-reinforcing motivation mechanism (Hidayat & Muliadi, 2022).

This raises critical pedagogical implications: Arabic programs in Islamic institutions should diversify motivational entry points, especially for non-Muslim learners. Future research could explore whether such symbolic capital sustains long-term engagement or wanes without external reinforcement (e.g., academic recognition or employment pathways). Moreover, this underscores the need for Arabic curricula to reflect plural motivations beyond devotional utility (Asari & Abidin, 2020).

The adaptation process also illustrates the cognitive and emotional labor required of students operating outside their religious and linguistic comfort zones. As Chou et al., (2015) and (Geary, 2008) suggest, successful learners engage in metacognitive monitoring and goal-setting strategies, often informed by cultural awareness and social alignment. In this study, students adopted conformist behaviors to navigate institutional expectations—particularly regarding class decorum and religious symbols. While this suggests institutional integration, it also raises questions about assimilation and the thin line between adaptation and erasure. As Hurlock (2008) notes, conformity may be functional but is rarely ideologically neutral.

Alternative readings of this behavioral adaptation could see it as performative compliance rather than genuine comfort. This highlights a limitation of the current data: the absence of deeper narrative interviews that explore inner tensions or coping mechanisms. Nevertheless, it signals to educators that creating safe spaces for identity expression is essential to prevent hidden costs of conformity, especially in religiously coded learning environments.

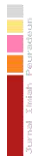
The Arabic learning environment in PTKIN remains largely content-driven and lecturer-centered. Given the limited contact time (2 credit hours), students relied more heavily on peer-based learning to construct meaning. This organic formation of peer learning communities (Hilsdon, 2014; Tosey & Gregory, 1998) provided not only cognitive scaffolding but also affective support in managing the pressure of learning a religiously coded language. This echoes Springer's (2008) work on peer relations as critical buffers in transitional academic spaces. Institutions should thus move beyond teacher-centric designs and invest in socially embedded learning platforms to support diverse learners.

However, peer learning—while supportive—may not always be equitable or inclusive. The study did not capture potential peer hierarchies or micro-exclusions that might affect minority learners. As a practical implication, structured peer mentoring or interfaith learning circles could institutionalize support systems while ensuring access and oversight.

Another adaptive strategy observed was students' active engagement with their original faith when returning to their communities. Religious reaffirmation acted as a counterbalance to the intense Islamic academic exposure, maintaining equilibrium between public integration and private identity. This dualism parallels Bystydzienski's model (Abramovich & Wardrip, 2020), where ritual performance reinforces community belonging and ideological anchoring. It also suggests that faith identity is not necessarily threatened in pluralistic academic settings, but rather negotiated in layered and context-sensitive ways.

This dual strategy reveals a form of "religious bilingualism", where students navigate two faith worlds with situational fluency. It underscores the importance of context-sensitive pedagogy that respects faith plurality without demanding ideological conformity. Future research should investigate how sustained this dualism is post-graduation, and whether it leads to interfaith bridge-building or silent compartmentalization.

In sum, this study contributes to global literature on religious identity in foreign language learning by foregrounding the agency of



minority learners in navigating religio-linguistic environments. It shifts the focus from identity transformation to identity resilience and offers a model for inclusive religious education that transcends doctrinal boundaries. These findings advocate for a reimagined Arabic pedagogy—one that integrates intercultural competence, symbolic capital, and plural identity negotiation as core components of the learning process.

To date, few studies have focused on non-Muslim learners in Islamic educational institutions. This study uniquely addresses that gap by exploring how minority learners construct religious resilience rather than identity transformation. Such a perspective has been largely underrepresented in global discussions on faith-language intersections.

The thematic analysis further confirms the centrality of Arabic’s Islamic content in shaping both identity and adaptation. Using ATLAS.ti, the highest co-occurrence (0.29) was found between “adaptation” and “Islamic Arabic content”, indicating that the religious layer of Arabic—not the linguistic structure itself—posed the most significant adjustment challenge. As shown in Figure 1.

		◇ Adaptation ☺ 49	◇ Identity ☺ 35
◇ Adaptation ☺ 49			2 (0,02)
◇ How to adapt to an Islamic campus environme... ☺ 13		13 (0,27)	
◇ How to adapt to course lecturers ☺ 14		13 (0,26)	
◇ How to adapt to Islamic Arabic content ☺ 18		15 (0,29)	1 (0,02)
◇ How to adapt to Muslim-majority peers ☺ 15		11 (0,21)	4 (0,09)
◇ How to adapt to the Non-Muslim Majority fami... ☺ 9		9 (0,18)	1 (0,02)
◇ Identity ☺ 35		2 (0,02)	
◇ Non-Muslim Beliefs in Learning Arabic ☺ 18		6 (0,10)	10 (0,23)
◇ Non-Muslim Perceptions of Arabic ☺ 31		6 (0,11)	22 (0,50)

Figure1: Co-occurrence values of each theme

The intrinsic linkage between Arabic language instruction and Islamic content is historically grounded in Arabic’s role as the primary language of Islamic revelation (Boudelaa & Marslen-Wilson, 2013; Asari, 2019). However, within the context of multicultural and religiously diverse

higher education settings, this integration often poses a substantial adaptive burden for non-Muslim students (Jaspal & Coyle, 2010; Aladdin, 2010, 2013). Their limited exposure to Islamic concepts, terminologies, and values can transform language learning from a purely linguistic task into a complex negotiation of identity and belief (Whiteley, 2017; Dajani et al., 2014).

This tension highlights the critical need to reconsider curriculum design and instructional materials, particularly by recalibrating the balance between religious content and linguistic competence (Nasution et al., 2024; Hajaroh et al., 2023). It also underscores the urgency of decoupling the structural elements of the Arabic language—as a semiotic and communicative system—from its embedded religious values (Ritonga et al., 2023; Zhanabergenova & Kairbekov, 2024). Such an approach does not aim to negate the historical or cultural significance of Islam in the Arabic language, but rather to reposition it contextually and proportionally within an inclusive and pluralistic educational framework (Gokaru et al., 2024). This reflective stance enables Arabic to be approached as a global and academic language accessible to learners from all faith backgrounds.

Beyond the Indonesian context, these findings offer valuable insights into the international discourse on language education in multicultural societies. Arabic, as demonstrated in this study, can function as a bridge for interreligious understanding when taught within frameworks that uphold both linguistic rigor and religious sensitivity (Amir et al., 2023). This model has significant implications for other multicultural nations grappling with how to integrate religious identity into foreign language instruction without marginalizing minority learners. By foregrounding tolerance and moderation, the experiences of non-Muslim students in PTKIN provide a replicable paradigm for inclusive Arabic education across diverse geopolitical settings (Nasution et al., 2024; Ritonga et al., 2023).

The Indonesian experience resonates with similar dynamics in other multicultural societies where religiously coded languages are taught in secular or religiously plural settings. In Malaysia, for instance, non-Muslim students have engaged with Arabic instruction through identity



negotiation rather than assimilation (Aladdin, 2010; 2013). Likewise, in Scandinavia, learners approach Arabic not as a religious vehicle but as a foreign language with geopolitical and cultural significance (Calafato, 2020). These parallels suggest that the findings from PTKIN are not contextually isolated, but rather echo broader global patterns. Thus, Indonesia's model offers a comparative vantage point for exploring how Arabic can be taught inclusively in settings where minority students may face similar cultural-religious tensions.

Moreover, the inclusive pedagogical practices observed in PTKIN—such as peer support systems, institutional secularism in language instruction, and non-coercive religious environments—can inform curriculum development in both Muslim-majority countries and secular Western contexts. Institutions seeking to implement Arabic programs for diverse learners may benefit from adopting a pluralistic framework that decouples religious ideology from language pedagogy. This underscores the need for a globally adaptable model of Arabic instruction that supports intercultural literacy, promotes symbolic capital, and affirms the agency of religious minorities in educational spaces.

While it is impossible to uproot Arabic completely from its Islamic theological background (Wiegers, 1995), in a multicultural class, its teaching must emphasize Arabic cultural dimensions and its function in general communication (Sabry, 2012; Gokaru et al., 2024). The teaching process needs to take full advantage of Arabic's proven ability to adjust to new situations and usages (Abdulaziz, 1986), especially when supported by technological innovations and institutional reforms as noted in recent e-learning initiatives (Ritonga et al., 2024). As such, Arabic should fully recognize the contribution of local varieties of Arabic from among Muslim nations, as described by Al-Wer (1997). Furthermore, it should also include as much vocabulary, meanings, and semantics as possible that are adopted or adapted from other foreign cultures, popularly known as *ta'rib* (Khalid, 2019; Zhanabergenova & Kairbekov, 2024). The findings of this study indicate that such trends have been noticeable at PTKIN, although more

substantial developments are to be expected in alignment with inclusive education strategies (Hajaroh et al., 2023; Nasution et al., 2024).

In addition, these findings contribute not only to the national discourse on inclusive education in Islamic institutions but also offer valuable insights to the broader global conversation on multicultural language education. In a world where religious plurality and intercultural interaction are increasingly unavoidable, the experience of non-Muslim students learning Arabic—a language often associated with Islamic identity—within Islamic higher education presents a unique model of religious tolerance and educational inclusion. This case highlights how religious identity negotiation and linguistic adaptation are not only pedagogical challenges but also social processes shaped by institutional ethos, cultural norms, and power dynamics. The Indonesian model, as reflected in PTKIN, could inform similar contexts in other Muslim-majority nations facing the challenge of fostering inclusive Islamic education while preserving religious identity boundaries. Therefore, this study adds to the emerging global literature on religiously plural learning spaces, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of how language learning can serve as both a bridge and a boundary in interfaith academic environments.

D. Conclusion

This study explores how non-Muslim students at Indonesian Islamic universities (PTKIN) navigate religious identity through Arabic language learning. While recognizing Arabic's global relevance, they maintain distinct religious boundaries rooted in family and culture. Their strategies—reframing Arabic as a secular tool, utilizing institutional support, and building peer networks—reflect creative identity negotiation in a cross-faith context. Despite a limited sample, the study offers theoretical insights into language learning as a dynamic, socially situated process of identity adaptation in interreligious academic settings.

Theoretically, this research contributes to sociolinguistic discourse by challenging dichotomous assumptions that strictly associate language with religion, positioning Arabic as a medium for global literacy and cross-cultural



engagement. Pedagogically, it highlights the importance of inclusive, secular approaches that recognize and accommodate the religious diversity of learners. Practically, the study urges PTKIN institutions to develop Arabic language instruction models that embody the principles of religious moderation, fostering equitable, tolerant, and pluralistic educational environments.

Methodologically, future studies should adopt triangulated data collection techniques and include a broader range of institutional settings to improve representativeness and analytical depth. This study also encountered methodological constraints in accessing a more diverse range of PTKIN campuses and religious backgrounds, largely due to institutional limitations and ethical considerations. These challenges underscore the importance of building collaborative, cross-institutional research networks to enable more comprehensive comparative analyses across regions and religious affiliations. Future research could thus explore Arabic language learning experiences across a wider range of interfaith contexts, both within and beyond Indonesia.

Moreover, while the current findings offer a foundational perspective on inclusive Arabic teaching, there remains a need to operationalize these insights into concrete pedagogical innovations. This entails designing curriculum frameworks that explicitly embed the values of religious moderation, alongside teacher development programs attuned to the dynamics of interfaith classrooms.

Ultimately, the findings underscore the potential of inclusive Arabic language education as a powerful platform for fostering pluralism and interreligious understanding. Educators are encouraged to adopt multicultural teaching approaches aligned with the values of moderation and mutual respect. In doing so, this study contributes not only to the academic discourse on language and identity but also to the practical advancement of Arabic pedagogy, laying the groundwork for inclusive learning models rooted in the ethical and civic values of religious moderation.

More importantly, this Indonesian case provides a transferable model for global educational systems confronting similar challenges in balancing

religious identity and language instruction. As Arabic continues to expand as a global language of diplomacy, migration, and economic interaction, the experience of non-Muslim learners in Islamic institutions can offer pedagogical insights for other multicultural societies. Future global applications of this model may help bridge interfaith divides, reduce religious prejudice, and cultivate a generation of learners who engage with language as a tool for mutual understanding rather than ideological assimilation.

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