

Comparative Analysis of Arabic Language Curriculum Policy in Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia

Azibur Rahman^{1*}, Zaky Mubarak²

¹STAI AL AKBAR Surabaya, Indonesia

²STAI AL AKBAR Surabaya, Indonesia

^{1*}Correspondence Author's E-mail: rahman.azib99@gmail.com

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Abstract

Arabic language learning across Southeast Asia occupies a strategic yet uneven position, shaped by distinct sociocultural, religious, and institutional dynamics in each country. This study analyzes differences in curriculum models, teaching material effectiveness, and instructional methods applied in Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia, focusing on government policy, teaching material structure, and teacher pedagogical competence at the secondary education level. Using a qualitative comparative design with purposive sampling, data were collected through interviews, participatory observation, and document study, then analyzed through data reduction, thematic display, and conclusion verification. The findings show that Malaysia relies on a structured, technology-supported curriculum oriented toward academic linguistic competence; Thailand maintains traditional halaqah-based instruction oriented toward religious identity, with limited exposure to communicative Arabic outside the classroom; and Indonesia pursues a contextual, communicative approach across four language skills but faces substantial infrastructure and standardization disparities. A three-component language policy framework, comprising language management, beliefs, and practices, helps explain why strong central policy in Malaysia does not automatically translate into stronger learning outcomes without adequate teacher training and authentic language exposure. The study proposes a more flexible, context-sensitive curriculum model to address linguistic and structural barriers across the region.

Keywords

Arabic language curriculum;
comparative education;
language policy;
Southeast Asia;
curriculum reform

Abstrak

Pembelajaran bahasa Arab di kawasan Asia Tenggara menempati posisi strategis namun tidak merata, dibentuk oleh dinamika sosiokultural, religius, dan institusional yang berbeda di setiap negara. Penelitian ini menganalisis perbedaan model kurikulum, efektivitas materi ajar, dan metode instruksional yang diterapkan di Malaysia, Thailand, dan Indonesia, dengan fokus pada kebijakan pemerintah, struktur materi ajar, dan kompetensi pedagogis guru di tingkat pendidikan menengah. Dengan menggunakan desain kualitatif komparatif dan sampling purposif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara, observasi partisipatif, dan studi dokumentasi, kemudian dianalisis melalui reduksi data,

Kata Kunci

*kurikulum bahasa Arab;
pendidikan komparatif;
kebijakan bahasa;
Asia Tenggara;
reformasi kurikulum*

<i>penyajian tematik, dan verifikasi kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Malaysia mengandalkan kurikulum terstruktur berbasis teknologi yang berorientasi pada kompetensi linguistik akademik; Thailand mempertahankan pengajaran tradisional berbasis halaqah yang berorientasi pada identitas religius, dengan keterpaparan bahasa Arab komunikatif yang terbatas di luar kelas; dan Indonesia menempuh pendekatan kontekstual-komunikatif pada empat keterampilan berbahasa namun menghadapi disparitas infrastruktur dan standardisasi yang besar. Kerangka kebijakan bahasa tiga komponen, yaitu manajemen, keyakinan, dan praktik bahasa, membantu menjelaskan mengapa kebijakan pusat yang kuat di Malaysia tidak otomatis menghasilkan capaian belajar yang lebih baik tanpa pelatihan guru dan paparan bahasa yang otentik. Penelitian ini mengusulkan model kurikulum yang lebih fleksibel dan peka konteks untuk mengatasi hambatan linguistik dan struktural di kawasan ini.</i>	
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INTRODUCTION

Background of the Problem

Arabic language learning in Southeast Asia occupies a strategic position, driven by sociocultural, religious, and institutional dynamics unique to each country ([Dedduang & Kholis, 2025](#); [Riswar et al., 2025](#)). Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia represent a diverse pedagogical landscape, where Arabic functions not only as a religious instrument but also as a subject integrated into formal education under distinct curriculum frameworks ([Siregar et al., 2025](#); [Sulistyaningsih & Syamsiyah, 2025](#)).

Although the three countries share overlapping Islamic and Malay cultural traditions, implementing Arabic instruction on the ground faces complex challenges. Muslim-minority demographic variation, such as in Southern Thailand, produces a sociolinguistic character that needs specific methodological adaptation ([Bahalwan, 2017](#)). Malaysia tends to emphasize a structured system with technology integration ([Riswar et al., 2025](#)), while Indonesia often faces infrastructure disparity and curriculum standardization challenges ([Maksum & Jumaha, 2024](#); [Siregar et al., 2025](#)), producing uneven effectiveness in knowledge transmission across the region.

Existing literature tends to stay partial or focused on a single region, such as textbook analysis ([Shaputra, 2020](#)) or single-institution policy study ([Bahalwan, 2017](#)). Integrative comparative studies mapping pedagogical practice across Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia together remain limited, particularly in identifying how curriculum innovation and teachers' structural challenges interact within a dynamic regional context ([Sauri et al., 2023](#); [Wahyu, 2023](#)).

Prior research provides a foundation for this study. Several scholars have compared textbook effectiveness ([Shaputra et al., 2021](#)) and examined multicultural approaches in Arabic education ([Sulistyaningsih & Syamsiyah, 2025](#)). Other work examines Critical Language Awareness approaches in Malaysia and Indonesia ([Sauri et al., 2023](#)) and the interaction between Arabic and local languages in traditional Thai schools ([Yenprasit & Naknawa, 2025](#)). These studies point to the need for balance between traditional and modern methods in addressing contemporary linguistic challenges ([Dedduang & Kholis, 2025](#)).

This study aims to analyze in depth the differences in curriculum models, teaching material effectiveness, and instructional methods applied at educational institutions in Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia. The scope focuses on comparing official government policy, teaching material structure, and teachers' pedagogical competence in managing Arabic classrooms at the secondary education level. Through a qualitative, descriptive, and comparative approach, the study maps disparities and points of convergence in curriculum implementation, aiming to formulate an alternative model that addresses linguistic barriers and raises the quality of Arabic language learning regionally across Southeast Asia.

Identification of Problems

Three problems follow from this background. First, curriculum models, teaching materials, and instructional methods for Arabic language education vary substantially across Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia, yet no integrative study has mapped these differences and their points of convergence together. Second, existing research tends to examine a single country or a single institution in isolation, such as textbook analysis in one country or policy study at one school, which leaves the interaction between curriculum innovation and teachers' structural challenges across the region under-examined. Third, government language policy in each country does not always translate consistently into classroom practice or measurable learning outcomes, and the mechanism behind this gap, particularly the interaction among language management, beliefs, and practices, needs closer comparative examination. These problems point to a gap between the shared regional aspiration for effective, contextually grounded Arabic instruction (*das sollen*) and the fragmented, country-specific evidence base currently available to guide it (*das sein*).

Formulation of the Problem

Based on this background, the research problems are formulated as follows: first, how do curriculum models and teaching materials for Arabic language education differ across Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia; second, what teaching methods and instructional practices characterize Arabic classrooms in each country, and how effective are they; and third, how do government language policy, sociocultural factors, and teacher pedagogical competence interact to shape Arabic learning outcomes across the three countries.

Objectives and Benefits of Research

Research Objectives

This study aims to analyze differences in curriculum models, teaching material effectiveness, and instructional methods applied at educational institutions in Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia, and to examine how government policy, sociocultural factors, and teacher competence interact to shape Arabic language learning outcomes at the secondary education level.

Research Benefits

Theoretically, this study contributes to comparative Arabic language education research by applying language policy theory, second language acquisition theory, and cultural capital theory across a three-country regional comparison rarely examined together. Practically, the findings can guide policymakers, curriculum designers, and Arabic language teachers in Southeast Asia toward a more flexible, context-sensitive curriculum model that addresses linguistic and structural barriers specific to each national setting while drawing on lessons from across the region.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Theoretical Framework

Second and Third Language Acquisition in Multilingual Contexts

Understanding foreign language teaching effectiveness in this regional context needs a solid conceptual foundation, particularly regarding second and third language acquisition theory. In the multilingual context of Southeast Asia, Arabic acquisition often involves complex interaction among the mother tongue, the national language, and the target language, each carrying a distinct linguistic system. Cognitive and sociocultural theories emphasize that successful language acquisition depends not only on input exposure but also on motivation, sociolinguistic background, and the instructional strategies applied in formal and informal environments alike.

Arabic language learning in Southeast Asia carries a distinctive characteristic because its role often extends beyond linguistic function to serve as an instrument of religious identity. Arabic in this region functions doubly, as both a communication medium and a spiritual symbol ([Dedduang & Kholis, 2025](#)). This dynamic creates a challenge for teachers in balancing language competence mastery with theological understanding, particularly amid the ethnic and cultural diversity present in Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia ([Sulistyaningsih & Syamsiyah, 2025](#)).

Regional Context: Arabic Education in Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia

The roots of Arabic education in Malaysia trace back to traditional pondok institutions and community religious schools, which served a vital role as centers of Islamic knowledge transmission among local Muslim communities. As education modernization demands grew, the Malaysian federal government took strategic steps toward institutionalizing religious education by establishing the National Religious Secondary School in 1977. This step was followed by integrating Arabic into the national curriculum, positioning the subject as an official component of secondary education rather than an addition. Curriculum development continued with the introduction of specialized subjects, such as Communicative Arabic and Higher Arabic, systematically designed to

strengthen students' linguistic competence. Instructional development challenges nonetheless persist, particularly the need for teachers competent in teaching productive skills to support a structured education system ([Riswar et al., 2025](#); [Siregar et al., 2025](#)).

In Thailand, particularly in the southern region, Arabic educational institutions root strongly in the traditional pondok system, which has historically functioned as a bastion of Muslim identity amid a diverse environment. National education policy beginning in 1902 pushed secular curriculum integration, yet Islamic institutions retained Arabic's position as a spiritual instrument and cultural identity marker. Today, many traditional educational institutions have transformed into formal institutions, with ongoing efforts to align Islamic curricula with national standards without losing their distinctive character. The interaction among Arabic, Malay, and Thai in learning practice shows how Arabic continues to play a crucial role in shaping the religious identity of the Muslim community in Bangkok and surrounding areas ([Yenprasit & Naknawa, 2025](#)). Facing modernity, these institutions have begun adopting digital technology as a learning support tool while retaining traditional methods such as halaqah to keep the transmission of Islamic values intact ([Riswar et al., 2025](#)).

In Indonesia, Arabic holds a highly strategic position within the national education system, forming an integral part of Islamic Religious Education subjects at Islamic schools and madrasah. The national curriculum generally directs attention toward mastering four language skills (maharah), which serve as the benchmark for students' Arabic competence achievement at the secondary education level ([Wahyu, 2023](#)). Implementation, however, faces substantial challenges related to infrastructure heterogeneity across regions and limitations in nationally uniform teaching material standardization ([Maksum & Jumaha, 2024](#); [Siregar et al., 2025](#)). Policymakers continue revitalization efforts to strengthen Arabic's position so it stays relevant to contemporary student competence development demands. Beyond its function as a communication tool, Arabic learning is also oriented as a multicultural bridge capable of building inclusive attitudes, tolerance, and respect for ethnic and cultural diversity in Indonesia ([Sulistyaningsih & Syamsiyah, 2025](#)).

Motivation and the Socio-Educational Model

From the motivational dimension, the Socio-Educational Model shows that attitudes toward the learning situation function as a predictor of learning outcomes ([Crookes & Schmidt, 1991](#)). Attitudes toward the learning situation influence outcomes more strongly than global religious or professional motivation alone ([Pham, 2021](#)). This framework also gives close attention to how teacher beliefs shape motivational strategy in EFL classrooms ([Altalhi, 2020](#)). Religious motivation and Muslim identity underlying Arabic language choice across the three countries do not automatically produce integrative motivation toward the Arabic-speaking community, particularly among students in Muslim-minority environments or those lacking access to Arabic-use environments outside the classroom.

Input Hypothesis and the Affective Filter

The second-language acquisition perspective Krashen proposes, particularly the Input Hypothesis and the Affective Filter, offers an explanation for the disparity in students'

productive ability across the three countries ([Ebrahim & Awan, 2015](#)). Applying the input and acquisition hypothesis to Arabic learning has been discussed conceptually in the pedagogical context of strengthening Arabic language skills ([Ainin, 2021](#)). This hypothesis also proves relevant for analyzing Arabic acquisition among L1 English learners exposed to two Arabic varieties simultaneously ([Alshehri, 2023](#)). Krashen proposes that language acquisition occurs when students receive comprehensible input at the $i+1$ level, and that the affective filter, comprising motivation, confidence, and anxiety, can block input from processing into functional intake.

Cultural Capital Theory

The sociological perspective Bourdieu's Cultural Capital Theory offers frames Arabic not merely as a communication skill ([Sullivan, 2001](#)). From this perspective, Arabic constitutes a form of cultural and religious capital convertible into social, economic, and symbolic advantage ([Rössel & Schroedter, 2021](#)). This cultural capital perspective also connects closely to the reproduction of cultural privilege in education systems that critical language pedagogy critiques ([Lin, 1999](#)). The relevance of cultural capital theory to subject ability and choice in higher education is confirmed across various social-class studies as well ([Werfhorst et al., 2003](#)).

Language Policy Framework

Differences in Arabic language learning policy identified across Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia cannot be understood merely as administrative variation; they reflect the configuration of three interacting language policy components: actual language practices in the field, beliefs or ideology about language, and explicit management efforts by state authorities ([Gomes, 2018](#)). This three-component configuration reads the structural contrast across education systems that the study's quantitative and qualitative findings reflect ([Wahyu, 2023](#)).

Conceptual Framework

Based on this theoretical foundation, the conceptual framework of this study positions Arabic language curriculum outcomes in Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia as shaped by the interaction of four elements. First, the three-component language policy framework, language management, beliefs, and practices, structures how national policy translates, or fails to translate, into classroom reality. Second, motivational and acquisition theory, comprising the Socio-Educational Model and Krashen's Input Hypothesis, explains variation in individual student outcomes within a given policy environment. Third, Cultural Capital Theory explains why investment in Arabic learning persists across the region despite varying Muslim population proportions, since Arabic functions as convertible social, economic, and religious capital. Fourth, the historical and institutional context specific to each country, pondok tradition in Malaysia and Thailand, and integrated madrasah education in Indonesia, conditions how these three theoretical elements interact locally. This framework treats curriculum effectiveness as neither purely a policy outcome nor purely an individual outcome, but as the joint product of national language management, local sociocultural belief, and the authentic language practice environment available to learners.

METHODOLOGY

This study applies a cross-country comparative research design with a qualitative approach, which, following Creswell, suits exploring complex, dynamic, and meaning-rich educational phenomena within each country's context in depth. The qualitative approach was chosen to capture local nuance in Arabic language education policy that a quantitative approach cannot reach.

Research subjects were determined through purposive sampling, in which educational institutions were selected based on representative criteria relevant to the research objective, following Sugiyono's principle that this technique is crucial for obtaining in-depth data on how national policy translates into field practice and for understanding challenges unique to each sociocultural context.

The main instrument in this study is the researcher, supported by an in-depth interview guide, a participatory observation sheet, and document study. Data analysis followed systematic, inductive steps, as Sugiyono describes, covering data reduction to identify key themes, data display through comparison matrices, and conclusion drawing or verification to ensure the validity and depth of findings across countries.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION ANALYSIS

Teaching Method Findings

Empirical data analysis shows a contrasting spectrum of teaching methods across Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia. In Malaysia, educational institutions have adopted intensive digital technology integration as a core component of the learning process, supported by a research-based curriculum and strong government backing ([Riswar et al., 2025](#)). This approach aims to make material transmission more efficient, though productive skills such as speaking still need strengthening ([Siregar et al., 2025](#)).

Educational institutions in Thailand, particularly in the southern region, still maintain the traditional halaqah method as the primary foundation for transmitting Islamic values and shaping identity ([Riswar et al., 2025](#)). Adaptive efforts nonetheless integrate digital technology as a support tool without abandoning this traditional root ([Riswar et al., 2025](#); [Yenprasit & Naknawa, 2025](#)), producing a hybrid approach in which classical method sits alongside modern innovation to maintain contemporary relevance.

Indonesia shows a more varied tendency, shifting toward contextual and participatory teaching models, particularly in madrasah that have adopted the national curriculum ([Sulistyaningsih & Syamsiyah, 2025](#)). Teaching focuses on mastering four language skills, maharah al-istima', al-kalam, al-qira'ah, and al-kitabah, as the primary competence target ([Wahyu, 2023](#)).

Table 1. Teaching Methods by Country

Country	Dominant Method	Primary Orientation
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Malaysia	Technology-/Research-Based	Linguistic Competence
Thailand	Traditional	Religious Identity
Indonesia	Communicative/Contextual	Four Language Skills

Curriculum Structure and Material Comparison

The Arabic curriculum structure across the three countries shows significant variation in design, objectives, and teaching materials. In Malaysia, the curriculum has institutionalized well through integration into the national system since 1977, with separate subjects such as Higher Arabic and Communicative Arabic (Siregar et al., 2025), enabling systematic, nationally standardized material development.

In Thailand, Islamic curricula at traditional institutions retain substantial autonomy, focused on strengthening Islamic values as an instrument of Muslim cultural identity (Yenprasit & Naknawa, 2025). Alignment efforts with the national curriculum continue, while institutions still maintain their distinctive character as the primary educational basis.

Indonesia applies the Arabic curriculum as an integral part of Islamic Religious Education subjects at madrasah, with nationally set standards (Wahyu, 2023). Teaching materials, however, often face uniformity constraints, with implementation across regions remaining uneven (Maksum & Jumaha, 2024).

This structural difference also affects teaching material selection. In Malaysia, materials support a structured system backed by digital media, while in Thailand, materials often still center on classical texts studied within the halaqah context. Indonesia, in its revitalization effort, has begun developing teaching materials more relevant to a multicultural context, aiming not only at communication but also as a bridge toward inclusive attitudes and tolerance (Sulistyaningsih & Syamsiyah, 2025).

Overall, Malaysia holds an advantage in curriculum standardization, Thailand stays strong in preserving traditional Islamic content, while Indonesia works through an adjustment process toward balancing national standards with contextual relevance.

Challenges and Barriers Identified

Challenges in Arabic language learning across the three countries cover technical, pedagogical, and structural aspects. In Malaysia, the main identified challenge is the shortage of teachers competent in teaching productive skills, even though technology infrastructure is already adequate (Siregar et al., 2025).

Thailand faces the challenge of aligning traditional Islamic curricula with national education standards without sacrificing deeply rooted religious identity (Yenprasit & Naknawa, 2025). This transition process needs sustained negotiation between education authorities and local communities.

Indonesia faces the most complex challenge, related to infrastructure heterogeneity across regions and limitations in nationally uniform teaching material standardization (Maksum & Jumaha, 2024; Siregar et al., 2025), which hinders even teaching effectiveness across the country.

Limited access to qualified teachers also stands as a significant cross-country problem. Teachers need more intensive training to implement modern teaching methods

effectively, whether technology-based or contextual ([Maksum & Jumaha, 2024](#); [Sulistyaningsih & Syamsiyah, 2025](#)). Student readiness and the learning environment present a further barrier: background variation among students, particularly in Indonesia and Thailand, needs a more sensitive, adaptive approach for Arabic learning to gain acceptance and understanding. Collectively, these challenges point to the importance of cross-country collaboration in sharing best practices and developing more adaptive learning models, with revitalization efforts in each country needing a focus on teacher quality improvement and more contextual, inclusive teaching material provision.

Student Achievement Patterns

Evaluation of student competence levels across the three countries shows achievement variation directly shaped by teaching method effectiveness in the classroom. Data collected from various educational institutions show that despite systematic effort, students' Arabic mastery still faces substantial challenges in reaching set linguistic competence targets.

Malaysia shows Arabic skill mastery directed more toward formal academic needs ([Siregar et al., 2025](#)). In traditional Thai schools, by contrast, the primary focus often centers on classical text reading ability, which produces communicative competence achievement at a moderate level, with some institutions reporting learning targets reached at only around 70 percent ([Rusli et al., 2024](#)).

Indonesia shows a more heterogeneous picture. Students in schools with good infrastructure access show fairly strong productive ability, while in resource-limited regions, active skill mastery such as speaking still needs substantial strengthening ([Siregar et al., 2025](#)).

The gap between curriculum targets and competence reality draws attention across various education evaluations. Limited exposure to a naturalistic Arabic-speaking environment stands as a key factor hindering language skill improvement, across Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand alike ([Dedduang & Kholis, 2025](#)). This condition confirms that competence achievement figures do not solely reflect student quality; they also mirror the available support system. Raising competence evenly needs an approach more focused on strengthening productive skills, beyond mere curriculum-material memorization.

Table 2. Student Proficiency Level by Country

Country	Proficiency Level	Primary Focus
Malaysia	Moderate-High	Academic/Linguistic
Thailand	Moderate-Low	Religious/Identity
Indonesia	Varied	Contextual/Communicative

Correlation Between Teaching Method and Learning Outcomes

Empirical analysis confirms a positive, significant correlation between the teaching method applied and student learning outcomes. Contextual, interactive method use tends to produce stronger language competence than conventional or pure-translation-focused methods ([Ubay et al., 2025](#)).

In Malaysia, structured methods backed by digital technology infrastructure contribute positively to learning outcome stability within the academic environment ([Siregar et al., 2025](#)). Without balance from intensive productive-skill practice, however, research shows student outcomes can stall at a moderate level, particularly in speaking fluency ([Firas, 2025](#)).

In Thailand, applying traditional methods that strengthen religious identity through classical text study directly benefits the preservation of scholarly tradition, though the impact on modern or communicative Arabic competence often stays limited ([Riswar et al., 2025](#)). Negotiating between this traditional method and the need for modern competence stands as the main challenge shaping students' final outcomes.

In Indonesia, clear evidence shows that the shift toward communicative, contextual methods correlates positively with rising student enthusiasm and productive skill ([Ubay et al., 2025](#)). Institutions adopting modern approaches show significantly different outcomes compared with institutions still heavily dependent on the conventional tarjamah method ([Ubay et al., 2025](#)).

Quantitative data show that the quality of pedagogical intervention, such as teacher training and material relevance, correlates more strongly with learning outcomes than mere physical infrastructure availability ([Firas, 2025](#)). Teaching effectiveness, then, depends not only on "what" gets taught, but "how" the material gets facilitated through classroom interaction. Raising Arabic learning outcomes across the three countries needs a paradigm shift from mechanical instruction toward a more integrative approach oriented toward genuine communicative competence, with cross-country collaboration in exchanging effective teaching-method best practices proving crucial for addressing similar pedagogical challenges across the region ([Riswar et al., 2025](#)).

Teacher Perceptions of the Curriculum

Educators across the three countries generally identify a misalignment between the set curriculum and students' need to reach communicative competence. In Indonesia, many teachers feel the curriculum focuses too heavily on classical textual literacy and grammar, neglecting functional speaking skill development for students ([Rivera et al., 2025](#); [Zurqoni et al., 2020](#)).

Teachers in Thailand face a similar challenge, where the burden of maintaining traditional methods in religious text study often limits room for applying a more interactive modern curriculum ([Riswar et al., 2025](#)). The curriculum, as a result, often reads as a rigid guideline offering limited flexibility for teachers to adjust material to heterogeneous student ability levels ([Rusli et al., 2024](#)).

In Malaysia, even with digital technology integration support, teachers highlight the need for a more research-based curriculum responsive to contemporary Arabic language needs ([Riswar et al., 2025](#)). Standardizing the curriculum without matching teacher training, they argue, will hinder teaching effectiveness at a higher level ([Dedduang & Kholis, 2025](#)).

Collectively, teachers stress the importance of their role in interpreting and applying the curriculum, though they often feel they lack sustained professional support to raise their

qualifications ([Dedduang & Kholis, 2025](#); [Zurqoni et al., 2020](#)). Teacher training focused on innovative teaching methods stands as crucial for bridging the gap between curriculum objectives and student outcomes ([Rusli et al., 2024](#)). A consensus exists among educators on the need for better balance between classical literacy mastery and practical communicative skill in the curriculum, with teachers believing that proper adjustment can turn the curriculum into a more effective instrument for preparing students for modern language challenges while still respecting traditional scholarly values ([Dedduang & Kholis, 2025](#); [Rivera et al., 2025](#)).

Sociocultural Factors

Religious motivation emerges as the most dominant sociocultural factor driving students across the three countries to learn Arabic, making it an inseparable part of their religious identity ([Dedduang & Kholis, 2025](#)). Cultural closeness to Islamic values creates a supportive environment, where Arabic learning counts as a means for deepening religious understanding ([Maghfurin et al., 2025](#)).

In Thailand, the presence of a minority Muslim community with aspirations to strengthen its identity through religious education provides a unique sociocultural context for Arabic learning ([Rusli et al., 2024](#)). Arabic serves as an important identity symbol, and Islamic schools function as cultural transmission centers that sustain the language's continued daily use ([Rusli et al., 2024](#)).

Non-formal environments, such as pesantren in Indonesia or religious institutions in Thailand and Malaysia, play a significant role in providing social support for students ([Riswar et al., 2025](#)). This environment offers a language-practice space unavailable within the formal classroom, shown to help students adapt socially and improve their language skill ([Maghfurin et al., 2025](#)).

The dynamic between minority or majority status in a given country also shapes sociocultural perception of Arabic's importance. In Thailand, Arabic learning is also seen as an opportunity for competitive advantage within the government sector, reflecting how political and sociocultural factors intertwine in shaping learning motivation ([Rusli et al., 2024](#)). Globalization pressure, finally, drives the need for pragmatic Arabic mastery for career purposes, interacting complexly with students' traditional motivation, and teachers need to recognize how these sociocultural factors, when managed well, can turn into a competitive advantage for students mastering Arabic in an increasingly dynamic environment ([Al-Busaidi, 2019](#); [Rusli et al., 2024](#)).

Discussion: Policy Implications for Learning Quality

In Malaysia, Arabic language policy is managed in a structured, standardized way through a federal curriculum applied consistently across religious secondary schools and Islamic educational institutions under the Ministry of Education ([Riswar et al., 2025](#)). This form of policy management strengthens the distribution of Arabic cultural capital among students at higher education institutions ([Siregar et al., 2025](#)).

In Indonesia, despite national curricular arrangements issued by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Education, field implementation shows very wide variation across institution types, from madrasah and pesantren to Islamic universities ([Maksum &](#)

[Jumaha, 2024](#)). This implementation variation widens further when viewed from the curriculum management side at modern pesantren, which demands contextual responsiveness ([Nisa, 2026](#)). Indonesia's management form also carries the influence of a multicultural approach distinctive to the Southeast Asian region ([Sulistyaningsih & Syamsiyah, 2025](#)). These findings indicate that language management stays relatively strong at the central level, while language practices at the local level depend heavily on human-resource conditions, pesantren leadership, and each institution's internal policy.

Thailand presents a different configuration, where language management at the state level stays moderate, with no mandatory national policy for Arabic ([Bahalwan, 2017](#)). At the same time, language beliefs at the community level, particularly among Malay Muslims in southern Thailand and diaspora communities in Bangkok, run strong ([Rusli et al., 2024](#)). Language practices, in turn, develop through traditional pesantren networks and community Islamic schools ([Dedduang & Kholis, 2025](#)). This imbalance among policy components stands as a key factor behind the quality differences identified in the quantitative findings.

From a curriculum design perspective, comparative analysis finds that Tyler's structure, which demands alignment among learning objectives, the selection and organization of learning experiences, and evaluation, has not been applied consistently across all three countries ([Maghfiroh et al., 2025](#)). This structure compares against curriculum development models operating at the national level across various Asian contexts ([Palupi, 2018](#)). In Malaysia, the four curricular components align relatively well, making learning quality more predictable and comparable across schools. In Indonesia, high decentralization produces partial alignment heavily dependent on local institutional capacity. In Thailand, curricular alignment depends largely on community or foundation initiative ([Bahalwan, 2017](#)), a pattern also observed in Arabic implementation at community-based schools in Bangkok ([Rusli et al., 2024](#)).

Taba's curriculum model, which starts from diagnosing local context needs before formulating objectives and content, offers a more contextual approach for addressing decentralization challenges in Indonesia and community dependence in Thailand ([Maghfiroh et al., 2025](#)). This contextual approach also aligns with programmatic development models built to strengthen Islamic religious education in the twenty-first century ([Şaban, 2021](#)), a case strengthened further when read alongside comparative curriculum policy analysis spanning Indonesia, Nigeria, and Yemen ([Yousef et al., 2025](#)).

Discussion: Contextual Factors Shaping Success

Arabic learning success across the three countries rests on complex interaction among policy, sociocultural, and individual variables, which the theoretical framework above frames through three complementary perspectives.

Applied to the findings, motivation theory helps explain why religious motivation and Muslim identity, though they drive Arabic language choice across all three countries, do not automatically translate into integrative motivation toward the Arabic-speaking community, particularly among students in Muslim-minority environments or those lacking access to Arabic-use environments outside the classroom ([Rusli et al., 2024](#)). This pattern also holds among international Thai and Cambodian students who treat

motivation as a key consideration in choosing Indonesia as a study destination ([Maghfurin et al., 2025](#)). Analysis of sociocultural factors among Arabic learners in Oman further shows that closeness to the target community stands as a determining variable ([Al-Busaidi, 2019](#)), consistent with Siregar et al.'s finding of significant motivational variation among Arabic learners at higher education institutions in Malaysia and Indonesia ([Siregar et al., 2025](#)) and with Zurqoni et al.'s finding that Arabic implementation often fails despite reportedly high student motivation ([Zurqoni et al., 2020](#)).

The Input Hypothesis and Affective Filter help explain why low Arabic input exposure outside the classroom in the Thai environment stands as a primary hindering factor, even among students whose initial motivation runs high ([Rusli et al., 2024](#)). By contrast, Arabic's involvement in worship, Friday sermons, and religious communication in the Indonesian and Malaysian environment tends to create more consistent input exposure, which lowers the affective filter ([Ainin, 2021](#)) and makes acquisition more likely among higher-education learners ([Siregar et al., 2025](#)).

Cultural Capital Theory, finally, explains why state and individual investment in Arabic stays high despite significant variation in Muslim population proportion across the two countries and sociocultural contexts. In Indonesia and Malaysia, Arabic serves as a primary form of capital for accessing advanced education at pesantren and Islamic universities ([Siregar et al., 2025](#)), functioning simultaneously as a social-mobility mechanism within a national religious structure shaped by a multicultural approach ([Sulistyaningsih & Syamsiyah, 2025](#)). In Thailand, Arabic ability provides access to strategic positions within the bureaucratic and religious structure of the Malay-Muslim community, which historically holds a degree of local administrative autonomy ([Rusli et al., 2024](#)), a pattern also visible in cross-border Arabic learning dynamics in neighboring countries in the region ([Dedduang & Kholis, 2025](#)).

Cross-Country Comparison

A comparative synthesis of the findings across the three countries reveals three main patterns clarifying the configuration of Arabic language policy in Southeast Asia.

The first pattern concerns the relationship between the strength of state-level language management and curriculum structural alignment. The more consistently a state applies its policy, as in Malaysia, the higher the structural alignment observed ([Riswar et al., 2025](#)), though this does not necessarily correlate positively with learning outcome quality when policy stays insufficiently sensitive to local needs ([Palupi, 2018](#)), a pattern also observed in comparative analysis of Arabic curriculum models across Southeast Asia and the Middle East ([Wahyu, 2023](#)). Looser policy in Thailand, by contrast, produces low national-level alignment ([Rusli et al., 2024](#)), while simultaneously allowing innovative model development at the community level ([Bahalwan, 2017](#)), a pattern relevant to cross-country Arabic learning dynamics across the wider Asian region ([Dedduang & Kholis, 2025](#)).

The second pattern concerns the role of Arabic input availability outside the formal classroom context. The sharpest disparity appears between metropolitan environments in Indonesia and Malaysia, where mosques, religious study circles, Arabic-language

media, and pesantren communities provide consistent input ([Ainin, 2021](#)), and minority Muslim communities in Thailand facing substantial constraint, where Arabic exposure outside the classroom stays very limited ([Alshehri, 2023](#)), a pattern that also varies according to the multicultural approach developed in Indonesia and Malaysia ([Sulistyaningsih & Syamsiyah, 2025](#)). This disparity correlates closely with the finding on productive student ability, which varies substantially across both countries and both regions ([Ebrahim & Awan, 2015](#)).

The third pattern concerns the cultural-capital dimension Arabic plays in each context. In Indonesia and Malaysia, Arabic functions as a formal subject with standard assessment ([Siregar et al., 2025](#)), giving parents and students a clear instrumental-rationality framework for investing in Arabic learning ([Sulistyaningsih & Syamsiyah, 2025](#)), a pattern also visible in Arabic learning policy analysis within Indonesia's madrasah curriculum context ([Maksum & Jumaha, 2024](#)). In Thailand, Arabic functions more as a community identity marker ([Rusli et al., 2024](#)), serving simultaneously as access to the minority sociocultural-religious structure ([Dedduang & Kholis, 2025](#)). Bourdieu's cultural-capital perspective helps explain why this highly varied range of policy and curriculum strategy can still be understood as part of one regional linguistic landscape ([Sullivan, 2001](#)), a perspective also tied specifically to the distribution of linguistic capital within a transnational economic order that crosses national borders ([Rössel & Schroedter, 2021](#)). These varied policies and curricula connect through pesantren networks, alumni, and cross-border student mobility that together form regional social reproduction ([Lin, 1999](#)).

Limitations

As a cross-country comparative study, this research faces several methodological limitations that need explicit elaboration. The first limitation concerns primary data accessibility: data collection depends heavily on curriculum document analysis, institutional reports, and interviews with key informants in each country ([Dedduang & Kholis, 2025](#)). This data collection form means that quantitative findings on student competence scores need cautious interpretation, given the differences in assessment standards across countries that prior research has shown ([Zurqoni et al., 2020](#)). Reported score data across contexts do not always use the same instrument ([Siregar et al., 2025](#)), so direct cross-country comparison needs care ([Rivera et al., 2025](#)).

The second limitation concerns local-level implementation heterogeneity that national-level document analysis cannot always capture. For Indonesia and Malaysia specifically, inter-institutional quality variation runs very high ([Wahyu, 2023](#)), which ultimately means national-level generalization needs restriction ([Maksum & Jumaha, 2024](#)); implementation heterogeneity at modern Indonesian pesantren shows a similar challenge ([Nisa, 2026](#)).

The third limitation concerns differing sociocultural and Arabic-language political dynamics occurring simultaneously in each country during the research period ([Yousef et al., 2025](#)), which means static comparative analysis cannot fully capture the ongoing process of change ([Rivera et al., 2025](#)). To triangulate findings, this study combines three data sources: policy and curriculum document analysis, in-depth interviews with teachers and education policymakers, and secondary student-outcome data. This source

triangulation allows cross-verification of key claims produced by document analysis ([Rivera et al., 2025](#)) and identification of areas where key informants' perception diverges from policy documentation, as reported in comparative Malaysia-Thailand study ([Riswar et al., 2025](#)), an approach also relevant to broader comparative analysis of Arabic learning across Southeast Asia ([Dedduang & Kholis, 2025](#)).

Contribution

This study contributes an integrative, three-country comparative account of Arabic language curriculum policy in Southeast Asia, an angle current literature has typically examined only within single countries or single institutions. By applying a three-component language policy framework alongside motivation, input-acquisition, and cultural-capital theory to a single cross-national comparison, this study offers a theoretical account of why strong central policy, as in Malaysia, does not automatically translate into stronger learning outcomes, and why looser policy, as in Thailand, can still sustain strong community-level language practice. This integrated account, and the alternative, more flexible curriculum model it points toward, gives Southeast Asian Arabic language policymakers and curriculum designers a comparative reference current single-country literature has not yet provided.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Conclusion

This comparative study concludes that Arabic language learning in Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia is shaped strongly by the dynamic interaction among national language policy, extralinguistic input availability, and Arabic's role as cultural capital. These findings offer a substantive contribution to Arabic pedagogy development by proposing a more holistic framework, one that focuses not only on linguistic skill acquisition but also considers sociocultural context integration and language's functional relevance for learners.

Suggestions

For policymakers, this study suggests strengthening the alignment among language management, beliefs, and practices rather than relying on central policy alone, since strong policy without adequate teacher training and authentic language exposure does not reliably translate into stronger learning outcomes, as the Malaysian case shows.

For Arabic language teachers and curriculum designers, this study suggests drawing on Taba's contextual, needs-diagnosis-first model to address decentralization challenges in Indonesia and community dependence in Thailand, while maintaining the structural clarity Tyler's model offers where centrally coordinated standardization is the priority.

For future researchers, this study suggests conducting longitudinal studies that can map student competence development continuously and evaluate the effectiveness of various innovative curriculum models at the level of specific educational institutions, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the patterns identified in this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

Azibur Rahman and Zaky Mubarak conceived the research idea, conducted the cross-country data collection and comparative analysis, and drafted and revised the manuscript. Additional author names, if any, should be listed here along with their specific contributions. All authors approved the final manuscript for publication.

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