

Investigating Students' Perspectives On The Role Of Arabic As A Foundation For Understanding Islamic Religious Education In The Digital Era

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: This study aims to explore students' perspectives on the importance of Arabic as a foundation for understanding Islamic Religious Education in the digital era, focusing on how Arabic supports students' comprehension of Islamic texts, learning experiences, and engagement with Islamic Religious Education content.

Methodology: This study employed a qualitative case study approach. Data were collected through written open-ended interviews administered via Google Forms to 17 students from three study programs at an Islamic higher education institution. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's framework.

Main Findings: The findings indicate that students perceive Arabic as a fundamental foundation for understanding Islamic Religious Education, particularly in comprehending Qur'anic verses, religious terminology, and course materials. Arabic is viewed as a functional tool rather than the ultimate learning goal. Digital technology is utilized to support Arabic learning, especially for vocabulary and terminology, although it does not replace lecturers' guidance. Students also face linguistic challenges, such as difficulties in *nahwu* (syntax), *sarf* (morphology), and limited vocabulary, as well as non-linguistic challenges related to motivation and the learning environment.

Novelty/Originality of this study: While previous studies have predominantly examined the urgency of Arabic mastery, its curricular effectiveness, or the technical integration of digital media in Arabic and Islamic Religious Education learning, limited attention has been given to how students themselves interpret and negotiate Arabic as an epistemic foundation within digitally mediated learning environments. This study advances the literature by synthesizing students' perspectives across four interrelated dimensions epistemic positioning, interpretive mediation, digitally mediated engagement, and multidimensional challenges thereby offering a more complex and experiential account of Arabic learning in Islamic higher education.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Arabic occupies a central position in Islamic Religious Education because it functions as the source language of Islamic teachings, particularly the Qur'an and Hadith [1], [2]. Mastery of Arabic is not merely related to linguistic competence; it also constitutes an epistemic prerequisite for accurately understanding the meanings

of Islamic teachings [3]. Therefore, Arabic is often positioned as a means or instrument for comprehending the Islamic sciences that support the understanding of Islamic subject matter within the context of formal education [4].

In the context of Islamic education at the higher education level, the role of Arabic becomes increasingly significant, as students are confronted with Islamic Religious Education materials that extensively refer to Arabic texts and terminology [5]. However, not all students possess an adequate background in Arabic language education. This condition has the potential to influence how students understand Islamic Religious Education materials and to encourage reliance on translations [6]. Several studies indicate that students outside Arabic language programs continue to perceive Arabic as an important necessity in Islamic studies, even though they also consider Arabic language learning to be a challenging subject that requires specific approaches in the learning process [5], [7].

Along with rapid technological developments, the teaching and learning of Arabic and Islamic Religious Education have increasingly entered digitally mediated environments that reshape how students access, interpret, and engage with religious knowledge. In contemporary higher education contexts, students frequently rely on online Qur'anic databases, digital tafsir platforms, machine translation tools, mobile dictionary applications, instructional videos, and even AI-assisted language tools to support their understanding of Arabic texts. Learning is no longer confined to printed textbooks or lecturer explanations; rather, it often involves on-demand searches, instant vocabulary lookup, algorithm-curated video explanations, and cross-referencing multiple digital sources. This shift transforms learning behaviors from sustained textual engagement to fragmented, search-based interaction with religious content and reconfigures the mediation of meaning, as digital platforms increasingly act as intermediaries between students and primary Islamic sources. While digital media provide flexibility, accessibility, and opportunities for autonomous learning [8]-[11], they also introduce epistemic risks, including superficial comprehension, overreliance on translation technologies, and diminished critical engagement when not guided by pedagogically structured instruction [8], [12]. Therefore, the digital era does not merely offer technological enhancement; it fundamentally alters the ecology of Arabic-Islamic learning and raises important questions about how students position Arabic as a foundation for understanding Islamic Religious Education within digitally mediated knowledge environments.

In addition, various studies indicate that Arabic language learning at the higher education level continues to face a range of persistent challenges, encompassing both linguistic and non-linguistic dimensions. Linguistic difficulties commonly include students' limited mastery of *nahwu* (syntax) and *sarf* (morphology), insufficient vocabulary acquisition, and challenges in applying grammatical rules within meaningful language use, which often hinder comprehension and productive skills development [13], [14]. Alongside these linguistic constraints, non-linguistic factors such as low learning motivation, unsupportive language environments, ineffective instructional methods, and limited exposure to authentic Arabic usage have been shown to significantly affect students' engagement and learning outcomes in Islamic higher education contexts [15], [16]. These findings suggest that difficulties in Arabic language learning cannot be attributed solely to individual learner deficiencies, but rather reflect recurring and systemic patterns of challenges that are also evident across diverse Islamic education settings, including *pesantren* and other higher education institutions [17], [18].

Despite the central role of Arabic in Islamic Religious Education and the growing body of research addressing its urgency, effectiveness, and pedagogical strategies [5], [7], [12], existing studies predominantly frame Arabic as an instructional object rather than as a lived experience of learners. Much of the literature emphasizes curricular design, technological integration, or linguistic difficulties, while relatively little attention has been devoted to how students themselves conceptualize and negotiate the role of Arabic as an epistemic foundation for understanding Islamic Religious Education, particularly within the evolving digital landscape. In the context of the digital era where learning increasingly involves online resources, applications, instructional videos, and algorithm-driven information access students' engagement with Arabic is no longer confined to formal classroom instruction but extends into digitally mediated environments that reshape how knowledge is accessed, interpreted, and validated. However, qualitative inquiries that foreground students' perspectives on this epistemic transformation remain limited. Consequently, there is a need for in-depth qualitative exploration that captures students' lived experiences, perceptions, and challenges in positioning Arabic as a foundation for understanding Islamic Religious Education in digitally mediated higher education contexts.

Based on this background, this study aims to examine students' views on the importance of Arabic as a foundation for understanding Islamic Religious Education in the digital era. Unlike much of the existing literature, which primarily frames Arabic learning in terms of curricular urgency, instructional effectiveness, or technological integration, this study centers students' interpretive experiences within digitally mediated Islamic higher education contexts. By examining how students conceptualize Arabic as an epistemic foundation, negotiate its role in understanding Islamic Religious Education, utilize digital resources, and confront linguistic and structural challenges, this research provides a layered and experiential account that complements and extends prior approaches.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

2.1. Type and Research Approach

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design. The qualitative approach was chosen to explore in depth students' views and experiences regarding the importance of Arabic as a foundation for understanding Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in the digital era. This approach allows the researcher to understand the meanings, perceptions, and experiences of the research subjects in a contextual and holistic manner [19].

A case study design was adopted because the research focuses on a single specific institutional context, namely Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam (STAI) Ar-Risalah Musi Rawas, thereby enabling an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation within its real-life context [20].

2.2. Research Subjects and Context

The research subjects consisted of 17 active students of STAI Ar-Risalah Musi Rawas from three study programs: the Islamic Business Management Study Program, the Arabic Language Education Study Program, and the Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Teacher Education Study Program. Details of the respondents' characteristics are presented in Table 1. The selection of subjects was conducted purposively by considering the representation of different study program backgrounds as well as their relevance to Islamic Religious Education and Arabic language learning in the context of higher education [21].

Table 1. Distribution of Participants by Study Program

Study Program	Number of Students
Sharia Business Management	7
Arabic Language Education	8
Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Teacher Education	2
Total	17

2.3. Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through written interviews administered via Google Forms. The interview technique was selected because it enables the researcher to obtain in-depth data regarding the views and experiences of the research subjects [19]. The use of online-based written interviews provides flexibility for respondents to answer questions reflectively and in accordance with the learning context of the digital era [22]. The interviews were conducted using open-ended questions to allow respondents to freely express their views, experiences, and challenges without being restricted by predefined answer options.

2.4. Research Instruments

The research instrument consisted of a written interview guide comprising eight open-ended questions. These questions were developed based on the focus of the study, covering students' views on the importance of Arabic, the role of Arabic in understanding Islamic Religious Education, the use of digital technology in Arabic language learning, and the challenges faced by students in learning Arabic. The use of open-ended questions aimed to elicit rich qualitative data and to allow variations in responses according to each respondent's individual experiences [21]. To clarify the relationship between the research focus and the interview questions, the instrument matrix is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Research Focus, Indicators, and Interview Questions

Research Focus	Explored Indicators	Question Numbers
Students' views on the importance of the Arabic language	Students' perceptions of the status and urgency of Arabic in understanding Islamic Religious Education	1, 2
The role of Arabic in understanding Islamic Religious Education	The function of Arabic in understanding Qur'anic verses, religious terminology, and Islamic Religious Education materials	3,4
The use of Arabic in the digital era	The use of digital media and technology to support Arabic language learning	5,6
Challenges in Arabic language learning	Linguistic barriers (<i>nahwu</i> , <i>sarf</i> , vocabulary) and non-linguistic factors (motivation, learning environment)	7,8

2.5. Data Analysis Techniques

The research was conducted through a series of systematic and chronological stages. First, the researchers determined the research design and selected the research subjects purposively based on their relevance to the research focus. Second, data were collected through written open-ended interviews administered via Google Forms. Third, the collected data were organized and analyzed using thematic analysis following the stages proposed by Braun and Clarke. Finally, data trustworthiness was ensured through consistency checks, the use of direct quotations, and transparent reporting of the analysis process [21], [23].

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was employed to identify, analyze, and report patterns of meaning (themes) emerging from the qualitative data [23]. The analysis process involved several stages: (1) reading all respondents' answers comprehensively to gain an initial understanding; (2) reducing the data by identifying meaningful units relevant to the research focus; (3) conducting initial coding; (4) grouping codes with similar meanings into main themes; and (5) presenting the results of the analysis in the form of thematic descriptions supported by direct quotations from respondents. This process resulted in four main themes that represent students' views and experiences.

2.6. Data Trustworthiness

Data trustworthiness was ensured through several steps aligned with good practice in qualitative thematic analysis. First, the consistency of respondents' answers was examined to identify recurring patterns of meaning across the emerging themes. Second, direct quotations from respondents were used to illustrate the connection between the data and the research findings. Third, the data analysis process was conducted systematically and transparently to ensure that the interpretation of themes remained grounded in the respondents' accounts. These procedures are consistent with the principles of rigorous and credible thematic analysis in qualitative research [23].

3. RESULTS

This section presents the results of written interviews conducted with 17 students of STAI Ar-Risalah Musi Rawas. The thematic analysis of the respondents' answers generated several main themes that illustrate their views on the importance of Arabic as a foundation for understanding Islamic Religious Education in the digital era.

3.1. Students' Views on the Importance of Arabic as a Foundation for Understanding Islamic Religious Education

Based on the results of the written interviews, students perceive Arabic as an important element in understanding Islamic Religious Education. This view emerges from students' awareness that Arabic is the language used in the primary sources of Islamic teachings, such as the Qur'an and Hadith. Therefore, Arabic is perceived not merely as a compulsory course, but as a foundational element that supports the understanding of Islamic teachings.

Several students stated that mastery of Arabic helps them understand the meanings of Qur'anic verses more directly. Students expressed that reliance solely on translations is considered insufficient for achieving a deep understanding of Islamic teachings. This is reflected in respondents' answers that emphasize the importance of Arabic as the source language of Islamic teachings.

“Arabic is very important because it is the language of the Qur'an, so it helps in understanding the meaning of verses directly.” (R1)

In addition, students also view Arabic as important because it plays a role in understanding Islamic terms that frequently appear in Islamic Religious Education learning. Some respondents conveyed that many religious terms are difficult to understand without a foundation in Arabic. By understanding Arabic, students feel it is easier to follow Islamic Religious Education materials that contain such terms.

“By understanding Arabic, it is easier for me to understand religious terms and the meanings of the verses being studied.” (R3)

Students also expressed that the position of Arabic differs from other Islamic studies courses. Arabic is viewed as a foundation that supports the understanding of Islamic Religious Education courses as a whole. When students have limitations in Arabic, they feel that they experience difficulties in understanding Islamic Religious Education materials related to Arabic texts or terminology. Conversely, better proficiency in Arabic is perceived as facilitating a smoother learning process.

These students' views indicate that Arabic is not understood as the ultimate goal of learning, but rather as a means that supports the understanding of Islamic Religious Education. Arabic is perceived as an initial foundation that helps students comprehend Islamic teachings in a more directed and meaningful way, based on their learning experiences during their studies.

3.2. The Role of Arabic in Understanding Islamic Religious Education

The results of the written interviews show that students perceive Arabic as having an important role in facilitating their understanding of Islamic Religious Education. Arabic is perceived as a means that makes it easier for students to understand Islamic Religious Education materials derived from religious texts. This role is experienced when students engage with Qur'anic verses, Hadith, and Islamic terms used in the learning process.

Several students stated that understanding Arabic helps them comprehend the meanings of Qur'anic verses discussed in Islamic Religious Education courses. Arabic is viewed as helping students grasp the intent of the verses more clearly, especially when the verses serve as the basis for explaining Islamic Religious Education materials. Students feel that understanding Arabic facilitates their ability to follow explanations of materials that are directly related to the sources of Islamic teachings.

“Arabic helps me understand the meanings of Qur'anic verses discussed in Islamic Religious Education classes.” (R4)

In addition to understanding Qur'anic verses, students also perceive Arabic as playing a role in understanding religious terms that are frequently used in Islamic Religious Education learning. Students mentioned that many religious terms are difficult to understand without a foundation in Arabic. With an understanding of Arabic, these terms become easier to comprehend within the context of Islamic Religious Education materials.

“When I understand Arabic, it is easier for me to understand the religious terms used in the lessons.” (R6)

Students also revealed that the role of Arabic is felt when lecturers explain Islamic Religious Education materials that relate to specific verses, Hadith, or Arabic terms. Understanding Arabic helps students follow these explanations more effectively, allowing Islamic Religious Education materials to be understood more comprehensively. In this context, Arabic is viewed as a supporting tool that clarifies the content of learning.

Furthermore, students stated that Arabic plays a role in supporting independent learning processes. By having a foundation in Arabic, students feel more confident when reading supplementary materials or references related to Islamic Religious Education. Arabic is perceived as helping students avoid complete dependence on translations, thereby making their understanding of Islamic Religious Education materials more independent.

Overall, the findings of this theme indicate that students perceive Arabic as having a functional role in facilitating their understanding of Islamic Religious Education. This role includes understanding Qur'anic verses, Islamic terminology, and explanations of Islamic Religious Education materials in general, based on students' learning experiences during their studies.

3.3. The Utilization of Arabic in the Digital Era in Islamic Religious Education Learning

The results of the written interviews indicate that students utilize developments in digital technology as a supporting means in learning Arabic and understanding Islamic Religious Education. This utilization is mainly aimed at assisting students in understanding vocabulary, religious terms, and explanations of Islamic Religious Education materials related to Arabic. Students perceive digital technology as a tool that facilitates the learning process outside the classroom.

Several students mentioned that they use applications and online resources to help them understand Arabic when they encounter difficulties in Islamic Religious Education learning. Digital media are perceived as making it easier for students to find the meanings of vocabulary or brief explanations related to Arabic terms that appear in Islamic Religious Education materials. The use of digital media is considered helpful because it can be accessed at any time according to students' needs.

“I often use applications and instructional videos to help understand Arabic.” (R2)

In addition to applications, students also reported using instructional videos as supplementary learning resources. Videos are considered helpful because they present explanations in visual and audio formats, making it easier for students to understand pronunciation and the meanings of Arabic vocabulary related to Islamic Religious Education materials. This medium is used by students to review materials that they did not fully understand during lectures.

Students also stated that digital technology assists them in the process of independent learning. With access to various digital resources, students feel more supported in learning Arabic independently outside lecture hours. This utilization of digital technology is perceived as supporting students who have limited foundations in Arabic, as it allows them to learn gradually according to their respective abilities.

Nevertheless, students perceive that the use of digital technology functions more as a support rather than a substitute for classroom learning. Digital media are used to complement lecturers' explanations and to clarify Islamic Religious Education materials related to Arabic. From the students' perspective, lecturers' guidance remains necessary so that the use of digital technology can optimally support the understanding of Islamic Religious Education.

Overall, the findings of this theme show that students utilize digital technology as a means to support Arabic language learning in the digital era. Digital media are perceived as helping students understand vocabulary, terminology, and Arabic-related materials associated with Islamic Religious Education, based on their learning experiences.

3.4. Challenges in Learning Arabic as a Foundation for Understanding Islamic Religious Education in the Digital Era

The results of the written interviews show that students face various challenges in learning Arabic as a foundation for understanding Islamic Religious Education. These challenges arise from students' learning experiences during their studies and affect their process of understanding Islamic Religious Education materials related to Arabic.

From a linguistic perspective, students frequently expressed difficulties in understanding Arabic grammar, particularly related to *nahwu* (syntax) and *sarf* (morphology). These difficulties are experienced when students are required to understand sentence structures or word form changes in Arabic texts used in Islamic Religious Education learning. Students stated that understanding these rules is still perceived as difficult and requires time as well as continuous practice.

"The main difficulty I face is understanding nahwu (syntax) and sarf (morphology)." (R5)

In addition to grammatical difficulties, students also mentioned limited Arabic vocabulary as a challenge in the learning process. Limited vocabulary makes it difficult for students to understand texts or religious terms that appear in Islamic Religious Education materials. In such conditions, students often feel the need to seek additional assistance, such as consulting dictionaries or digital resources, to understand the meanings of unfamiliar words.

Besides linguistic challenges, students also expressed the presence of non-linguistic challenges that affect Arabic language learning. Some students mentioned unstable learning motivation, as well as limited time to study Arabic in depth amid the demands of other courses. These challenges are perceived as affecting students' consistency in learning Arabic.

Students also referred to a learning environment that does not yet fully support the sustained use of Arabic. The lack of opportunities to practice using Arabic outside the classroom makes students feel it is difficult to develop their Arabic language skills more optimally. Arabic language learning is still perceived as being limited to the classroom and not yet fully integrated into daily academic activities.

Overall, the findings of this theme indicate that students face both linguistic and non-linguistic challenges in learning Arabic as a foundation for understanding Islamic Religious Education. These challenges include difficulties in understanding grammar, limited vocabulary, learning motivation, and the learning environment, as expressed by students based on their learning experiences.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. Students' Views on the Importance of Arabic as a Foundation for Understanding Islamic Religious Education

The findings reveal that students conceptualize Arabic not merely as a compulsory academic subject, but as an epistemic gateway that mediates their access to Islamic knowledge. Rather than framing Arabic as an end in itself, students consistently position it as a foundational instrument that enables them to interpret Qur'anic verses, religious terminology, and Islamic Religious Education content more meaningfully. This perception reflects a form of epistemic awareness: students recognize that without linguistic access to the source language, their understanding remains mediated and potentially limited by translation.

What is particularly noteworthy is that students' emphasis on Arabic does not emerge from abstract theological or institutional claims, but from concrete learning experiences. Their recognition of Arabic as foundational is shaped by moments of difficulty, dependence on translation, and encounters with religious terms that resist simplified interpretation. In this sense, Arabic is experienced not only as a key to knowledge, but also as a boundary marker between superficial familiarity and deeper comprehension.

Previous studies have reported both the perceived necessity of Arabic among non-Arabic-major students [24] and the broader curricular urgency of Arabic mastery in Islamic education [25], [26]. However, the present findings extend this discussion by demonstrating how such urgency is internally negotiated and justified through students' lived experiences. Rather than passively accepting normative claims about the importance of Arabic,

students articulate its value through experiential reasoning grounded in classroom interaction and textual engagement. This shifts the discussion from a purely institutional justification of Arabic toward an exploration of learner consciousness and epistemic positioning within Islamic higher education.

Thus, the importance of Arabic, as expressed by students in this study, extends beyond functional necessity. It reflects a developing awareness of language as a medium that shapes access to meaning, authority, and interpretive depth in Islamic Religious Education.

4.2. The Role of Arabic in Understanding Islamic Religious Education

The findings demonstrate that students perceive Arabic as playing a direct yet mediated role in facilitating their understanding of Islamic Religious Education. Arabic is not experienced as a purely symbolic connection to sacred sources, but as a practical interpretive tool that enables students to navigate Qur'anic verses, Hadith, and religious terminology with greater conceptual clarity. However, students' accounts also reveal that this role is not automatic; the presence of Arabic knowledge does not immediately eliminate interpretive difficulty. Rather, it reduces dependence on translation while still requiring guidance, contextual explanation, and structured engagement.

This nuance is significant. While Arabic is often framed in educational discourse as providing "direct access" to primary Islamic sources, students' experiences suggest that access remains layered and mediated. Even with foundational Arabic competence, understanding depends on grammatical awareness, contextualization, and pedagogical explanation. In this sense, Arabic functions not as a guarantee of interpretive certainty, but as a means of deepening engagement with texts.

Previous research has emphasized that Arabic language mastery contributes to a more accurate understanding of Islamic teachings [27] and that its status as the language of the Qur'an positions it as a central medium of meaning [28]. Studies have also underscored the necessity of Arabic proficiency to avoid superficial engagement with Islamic sources [29], [30] and the risks associated with complete reliance on translation [31]. The present findings do not merely reaffirm these arguments; rather, they complicate them by showing how students experience this role in practice. Arabic proficiency, from the students' perspective, operates as a continuum rather than a binary condition of either "direct access" or "complete dependence."

Thus, the role of Arabic in understanding Islamic Religious Education, as reflected in this study, can be understood as interpretive mediation. It enables closer engagement with primary sources while simultaneously highlighting the continued importance of pedagogical scaffolding and contextual explanation. This perspective enriches existing discussions by foregrounding students' lived experiences of navigating meaning rather than treating Arabic solely as a doctrinal prerequisite.

4.3. The Utilization of Arabic in the Digital Era in Islamic Religious Education Learning

The findings reveal that students actively integrate digital technology into their Arabic learning practices, particularly when encountering difficulties in understanding vocabulary, religious terminology, and textual references in Islamic Religious Education. Applications, instructional videos, and online resources function as immediate problem-solving tools that allow students to clarify meaning outside formal classroom settings. Digital media are therefore experienced as practical extensions of learning rather than as alternative educational systems.

However, students' accounts also demonstrate a clear ambivalence. While digital tools enhance accessibility and autonomy, they are not perceived as self-sufficient mechanisms for deep understanding. Students repeatedly emphasize the continued necessity of lecturer guidance, structured explanation, and contextual interpretation. In this sense, digital technology operates within a pedagogical framework rather than replacing it. Autonomy is present, but it remains scaffolded.

Previous research has highlighted the effectiveness of digital applications and interactive media in supporting Arabic language learning [32] and emphasized the complementary role of technology alongside face-to-face instruction [12]. Studies have also shown that digital media can foster learning flexibility and student autonomy [33]. The present findings do not contradict these conclusions; rather, they refine them by illustrating how students themselves negotiate this balance. Digital tools are used strategically for immediate clarification, repetition, and review, yet students remain aware of their limitations in providing interpretive depth.

Thus, the utilization of Arabic in the digital era, as reflected in this study, can be understood as pedagogically mediated digital engagement. Technology expands access and flexibility, but meaningful understanding continues to depend on structured guidance and contextual explanation. This perspective complicates overly optimistic narratives of digital transformation by foregrounding students' recognition that technological accessibility does not automatically translate into epistemic depth.

4.4. Challenges in Learning Arabic as a Foundation for Understanding Islamic Religious Education in the Digital Era

The findings indicate a notable tension between students' recognition of Arabic as foundational and their continued struggle to master it. Positive epistemic awareness does not automatically translate into linguistic

competence. Despite acknowledging the importance of Arabic for understanding Islamic Religious Education, students encounter persistent obstacles that shape the limits of their engagement with religious texts.

From a linguistic perspective, difficulties in nahwu (syntax) and sarf (morphology), as well as limited vocabulary acquisition, remain central barriers. These challenges are not merely technical difficulties; they affect students' confidence and interpretive capacity when approaching Qur'anic verses and Islamic terminology. Previous research has similarly identified grammatical complexity as a primary source of difficulty in Arabic learning [34] and highlighted the impact of limited mufradāt on students' dependence on translation [18]. However, the present findings underscore how these challenges are experienced within Islamic Religious Education contexts, where linguistic weakness directly influences the depth of religious understanding.

Non-linguistic factors further complicate this situation. Students describe fluctuating motivation, limited time allocation, and insufficient opportunities for sustained Arabic practice beyond classroom settings. Research has emphasized the importance of motivation and supportive language environments in strengthening Arabic proficiency [35]. Yet, the findings here illustrate that even when students recognize the necessity of Arabic, environmental constraints and academic workload can hinder consistent engagement. Awareness alone is insufficient without structural reinforcement.

Moreover, the availability of digital technology does not fully mitigate these challenges. While online resources and applications assist with vocabulary lookup and clarification, they do not automatically resolve grammatical complexity or build sustained interpretive competence. This observation aligns with previous discussions suggesting that digital tools support but do not replace the strengthening of foundational language skills [34]. The digital era, therefore, does not eliminate the multidimensional nature of Arabic learning difficulties; rather, it coexists with them.

Taken together, these findings suggest that challenges in Arabic learning are layered and systemic. Linguistic complexity, motivational fluctuation, environmental limitations, and partial reliance on digital mediation intersect to shape students' experiences. Understanding these challenges requires moving beyond a purely skills-based explanation toward a broader view of Arabic learning as an interaction between epistemic aspiration and structural conditions within Islamic higher education.

5. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that students perceive Arabic as an epistemic foundation that mediates their understanding of Islamic Religious Education in the digital era. Arabic is experienced not as an end in itself, but as an interpretive instrument that supports engagement with Qur'anic verses, religious terminology, and course materials, while digital technology functions as a complementary tool that enhances access without replacing pedagogical guidance. At the same time, students face persistent linguistic challenges particularly in nahwu (syntax), sarf (morphology), and vocabulary as well as non-linguistic constraints related to motivation and learning environment, indicating that epistemic awareness does not automatically translate into linguistic competence. These findings imply that Arabic should be strategically integrated within Islamic Religious Education curricula and that digital resources must be pedagogically structured to promote interpretive depth rather than surface comprehension. However, this study is limited by its single-institution case design, small participant number, and reliance on self-reported written data, which restrict broader generalization and do not measure actual language proficiency. Future research may therefore expand to multiple institutional contexts, incorporate mixed methods or observational data, and examine specific digital interventions to better understand how Arabic learning can more effectively support Islamic Religious Education in diverse higher education settings.

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