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From Arabic Repertoire to CEFR: A Conceptual Framework for Reconceptualizing the Starting Point of Arabic Language Learning in Islamic Higher Education

Muhammad Amiruddin[1*], Moh. Ainin[2], Syuhadak[3], Sutaman[4]
Umair Rais Uddin[5], Chik Abdul Rahman [6]
Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, Indonesia[1,3,4]
Universitas Negeri Malang, Indonesia[2]
Sindh Madressatul Islam University Karachi, Pakistan[5]
International Islamic University Malaysia, Malaysia[6]

[*]Corresponding Author: *hmamiruddin@uin-malang.ac.id*

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Abstract

Arabic language education in Islamic higher education often assumes that first-year students from non-Arabic majors begin as homogeneous beginners, although some bring prior Arabic resources acquired through prayer, supplication, dhikr, and Qur'anic recitation. Such religious familiarity, however, does not necessarily indicate communicative, academic, or discipline-specific proficiency. This distinction raises a pedagogical question: how can learners' existing Arabic resources be recognized and connected to appropriate proficiency goals? This study aims to reconceptualize the starting point of Arabic language learning by developing a CEFR-informed, discipline-sensitive conceptual framework. It proposes the Salat-to-Kalam Continuum as a conceptual pathway through which learners' existing Arabic resources may be recognized and pedagogically activated. The study adopts a qualitative conceptual design based on an integrative literature review, synthesizing theoretical and empirical studies on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), Arabic language proficiency, Arabic for Specific Purposes (ASP), linguistic repertoire, translanguaging, religious language learning, and Islamic higher education. The synthesis indicates that

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repertoire-sensitive diagnosis is needed to identify learners' varied starting points, while CEFR provides a reference for articulating proficiency outcomes. The proposed continuum connects familiarity with ritual expressions to meaning-making, linguistic awareness, vocabulary and grammatical development, everyday communication, academic Arabic, and discipline-specific language use. These stages are conceptual possibilities rather than a universal or mandatory sequence. The framework thus links diverse learner resources with differentiated pedagogical support and shared academic standards. It offers a conceptual basis for reconsidering Arabic learning design in Islamic higher education, while its applicability requires further empirical investigation.

Keywords: Arabic language education; linguistic repertoire; Islamic higher education

Introduction

Arabic language education in Islamic higher education should not be treated merely as the teaching of a formal academic subject; it also involves developing a language that many Muslim students have already encountered in their religious lives. Before entering university, some students have acquired Arabic expressions through memorization, recitation, and repeated practice in prayer, supplication, dhikr, Qur'anic recitation, the call to prayer, and other devotional activities. These experiences suggest that many learners arrive at university with a relationship to Arabic more complex than a zero-entry profile would assume. In this study, Arabic language repertoire refers to the linguistic resources and prior experiences that learners bring to Arabic learning, including familiar expressions, remembered words or phrases, and varying degrees of recognition and understanding. It is distinct from language proficiency, which concerns what learners can actually do with the language in particular communicative contexts. Although this repertoire does not necessarily indicate communicative proficiency or guarantee grammatical awareness and academic literacy (Sarwat, 2011; Amiruddin, 2012), it may provide a meaningful resource for further learning. Research in Islamic educational settings also indicates that learners' use of Arabic is embedded within broader multilingual repertoires rather than confined to an exclusively Arabic environment (Kirom et al., 2024). Thus, recognizing familiar expressions should not be confused with the ability to interpret their meanings independently, analyse their linguistic structures, or use them communicatively.

An observation that helped motivate this conceptual inquiry involved a final-year student in a non-Arabic major at an Islamic college who struggled to explain the meaning of the phrase *lā sharīka lahu wa bi dhālika umirtu wa ana min*

al-muslimīn, despite having memorized and repeatedly recited it in daily worship. This anecdote is presented as an initial observation, not as systematically collected empirical evidence. It illustrates the distinction between familiarity with religious Arabic expressions and the ability to interpret and use Arabic independently, thereby highlighting the need to examine how learners' existing Arabic resources can be recognized and pedagogically developed.

For this reason, the starting point of Arabic learning should not be defined solely by classroom performance or placement test results; it should also account for the familiarity learners have developed through repeated religious use of Arabic. Such familiarity may include recognition of common phrases, partial understanding of meaning, emotional closeness to the language, and a sense of linguistic presence built up over time. In this sense, Arabic is not merely a subject to be learned but may also be understood as a lived language already present in students' religious experience. This perspective does not suggest that religious familiarity is equivalent to language proficiency. Rather, it invites educators to examine whether, and how, existing familiarity can be transformed into a pedagogically meaningful resource for subsequent language development (Kosim, 2022; Amiruddin, 2024). This orientation aligns with recent needs-analysis research in higher education, which shows that Arabic learning materials and instructional provision must respond to variation in students' and lecturers' needs rather than presuming uniform learning requirements (Rustamaji, Anhar, Nurlaila, & Rifki, 2024).

This issue is particularly relevant in Islamic higher education, where first-year students may come from highly diverse educational and linguistic backgrounds. Some may have studied in *pesantren* or Islamic schools, whereas others may come from general secondary education with limited formal Arabic instruction. Educational background may influence students' initial placement, confidence, and learning needs, but it cannot fully represent the Arabic resources they already possess (M. Amiruddin, 2014). A more comprehensive starting-point profile should consider what learners recognize, remember, understand, and can perform, including Arabic expressions embedded in their religious lives. The need for such contextualized profiling is also reflected in recent Arabic education research showing variation in instructional needs and language-learning conditions across higher-education settings (Rustamaji et al., 2024).

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) provides an influential framework for describing language proficiency through observable communicative activities and "can-do" descriptors. The CEFR Companion Volume emphasizes an action-oriented approach in which learners are viewed as social agents who mobilize linguistic and non-linguistic resources to accomplish meaningful tasks involving reception, production, interaction, and mediation (Little, 2016; Council of Europe, 2020). This

orientation carries important implications for Arabic language education, since proficiency should ultimately be demonstrated through what learners can do with the language rather than through grammatical knowledge alone.

Recent research on Arabic language education has increasingly applied the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) to curriculum development, teaching materials, and proficiency assessment, including the development of CEFR-based listening and speaking materials and the analysis of Arabic test items against CEFR levels (Primadana et al., 2024; Alfitri et al., 2025). A recent systematic review further highlighted the importance of curriculum alignment, teacher readiness, appropriate materials, technological integration, and institutional support, while identifying misalignment and limited institutional readiness as persistent challenges (Arrifqi et al., 2026). These developments establish the relevance of CEFR for describing proficiency and setting learning objectives. However, proficiency targets alone do not determine an appropriate starting point for learners with diverse educational backgrounds and prior encounters with Arabic.

The issue, therefore, is not an absence of research on Arabic proficiency, curriculum alignment, or learners' linguistic resources. Rather, these perspectives need to be connected more explicitly to explain how Arabic learning can begin from learners' existing resources in Islamic higher education. In particular, religious familiarity with Arabic needs to be distinguished from demonstrated proficiency and considered in relation to learners' communicative and discipline-specific needs. This calls for a conceptual connection between repertoire-sensitive diagnosis, language development, and proficiency targets, without assuming that prior familiarity automatically leads to communicative competence.

Accordingly, this study aims to develop a CEFR-informed, discipline-sensitive conceptual framework for reconceptualizing the starting point of Arabic language learning in Islamic higher education. It brings together perspectives on Arabic as a lived language, linguistic repertoire, communicative development, and discipline-specific learning needs to examine how learners' prior familiarity with Arabic may be identified and pedagogically activated. The proposed framework connects learners' existing resources with possible developmental pathways toward everyday communication, academic Arabic, and discipline-specific language use, while retaining CEFR as a reference for articulating proficiency outcomes.

The study makes three related contributions. Theoretically, it clarifies the distinction between religious familiarity, linguistic repertoire, and demonstrated language proficiency. Conceptually, it proposes the *Ṣalāh*-to-*Kalām* Continuum to explain how Arabic encountered in religious practices may serve as a resource for further communicative, academic, and discipline-specific

language development. Practically, it provides a conceptual basis for repertoire-sensitive diagnosis, differentiated instructional support, and the alignment of learning pathways with authentic assessment and shared proficiency expectations. Together, these contributions offer a context-sensitive perspective on recognizing heterogeneous learners' starting points without treating prior familiarity as evidence of established language competence.

Recent research on Arabic language education has increasingly explored the adaptation of the CEFR framework to Arabic proficiency assessment and curriculum design. Maulani et al. (2024), for instance, examined reference-level descriptors for Arabic proficiency tests in the Indonesian context, while other studies have addressed the classification of Arabic assessment tasks according to CEFR levels and their corresponding competency indicators (Maulani et al., 2024).

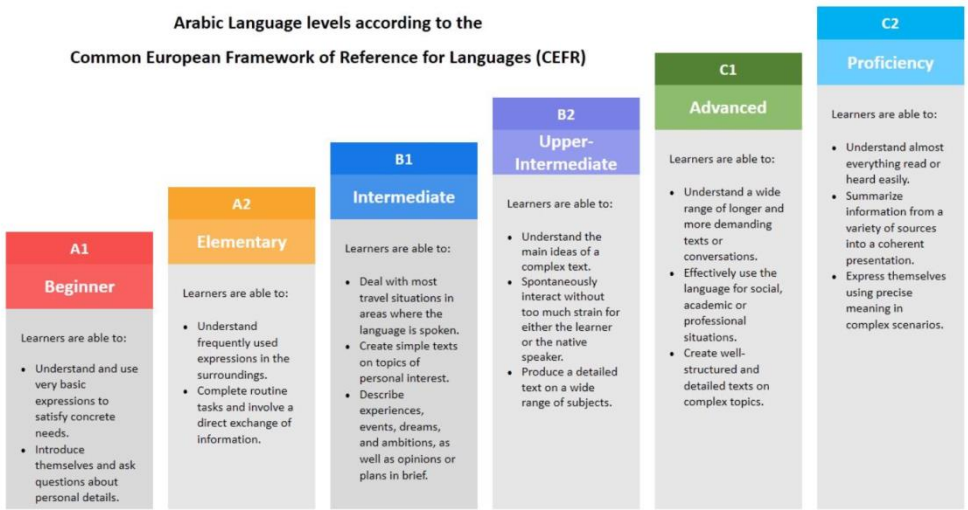


Figure 1. CEFR-Based Arabic Language Proficiency Levels
Source: TAFL Courses - pua.edu

These developments illustrate the growing relevance of the CEFR in establishing transparent and measurable standards for Arabic proficiency. Yet CEFR-based assessment and curriculum alignment do not, by themselves, explain how learners' prior Arabic repertoires should be identified and activated prior to formal progression toward higher proficiency levels. The challenge, therefore, is not simply to place students at A1, A2, or B1, but to establish a defensible relationship between their actual starting resources, communicative needs, and proficiency targets (Little, 2016; Nurdianto & Ismail, 2020).

This concern is closely related to the development of Arabic for Specific Purposes (ASP). Golfetto (2020) demonstrates that Arabic learners may hold diverse professional expectations across fields such as politics, diplomacy,

administration, business, tourism, and translation. Such findings support the principle that language education should respond to learners' purposes and anticipated domains of use. This principle is likewise reflected in research on Arabic instructional planning, which emphasizes aligning learning objectives, competency indicators, instructional activities, and pedagogical planning with learners' educational needs and learning conditions (Sanusi et al., 2022). Within Islamic higher education, this principle carries particular weight, as students from Islamic education, Arabic studies, Islamic law, Islamic economics, Islamic banking, psychology, information technology, engineering, and other disciplines may require different forms of Arabic literacy. A uniform proficiency target may therefore prove insufficient if it is disconnected from the communicative, academic, and professional functions demanded by each discipline.

At the pedagogical level, research has likewise demonstrated the importance of moving from formal language instruction toward meaningful communicative performance. Mahmudi et al. (2023), for instance, found that an Al-Muhadatsah textbook developed for first-year students at an Islamic boarding school significantly improved Arabic speaking performance, particularly when instructional materials were aligned with learners' abilities and communicative needs. This finding is relevant to the present framework, as it illustrates that progression toward communicative competence requires deliberate pedagogical activation rather than reliance on prior familiarity alone. Similarly, research on Arabic teaching approaches in Indonesia has explored methods designed to foster supportive and engaging learning conditions, suggesting that the effectiveness of language development is shaped not only by content but also by the pedagogical environment in which learners encounter and practise Arabic (Aflisia et al., 2021). While these studies do not directly address learners' religious repertoire, they reinforce the broader proposition that learners' existing resources must be connected to appropriately designed instructional processes.

At the same time, research on linguistic repertoire and translanguaging challenges the assumption that learners enter language classrooms as linguistically empty subjects. Research on Arabic as an additional or heritage language emphasizes that learners bring existing linguistic resources that can be mobilized for meaning-making, interaction, and metalinguistic awareness (Abourehab & Azaz, 2023; Uddin, 2024; Schaefer, 2023). These perspectives provide an important theoretical foundation for viewing students as learners who bring prior resources into the classroom. However, the concept of repertoire in this literature is generally discussed in relation to multilingualism, heritage language, and additional-language resources. Less attention has been given to the specific familiarity with Arabic formed through repeated religious practices among Muslim learners in Islamic higher education.

Taken together, the literature offers complementary but insufficiently integrated perspectives on Arabic language learning in Islamic higher education. CEFR provides a framework for describing proficiency and defining learning outcomes, while Arabic for Specific Purposes (ASP) foregrounds learners' communicative, academic, and disciplinary needs. Research on linguistic repertoire and translanguaging, meanwhile, emphasizes the linguistic resources learners bring to additional-language learning. However, these perspectives do not fully explain how familiarity with Arabic developed through repeated religious practices can be distinguished from actual language proficiency and incorporated into a coherent account of learners' starting points. The conceptual issue is therefore not the absence of research on Arabic proficiency, discipline-specific language learning, or learner repertoires, but the need to connect these perspectives within a context-sensitive framework for Islamic higher education. Such a framework needs to account for learners' pre-existing Arabic repertoire and religious familiarity without presuming that familiarity automatically translates into communicative competence.

To address this gap, the present study aims to develop a CEFR-informed conceptual framework for reconceptualizing the starting point of Arabic language learning in Islamic higher education. Specifically, it seeks to connect learners' pre-existing Arabic repertoire and religious familiarity with a developmental pathway toward communicative, academic, and discipline-specific Arabic, while retaining CEFR as a reference for defining proficiency targets. The framework is intended to clarify how learners' starting resources may be identified, interpreted, and pedagogically activated in relation to their communicative needs and disciplinary contexts.

To develop this framework, the study adopts the concept of Arabic as a lived language as a lens for understanding learners' prior encounters with Arabic beyond formal language instruction. This concept does not imply that religious practice automatically produces Arabic proficiency. Rather, it recognizes that repeated encounters with Arabic in meaningful religious contexts may create familiarity, recognition, and memorized linguistic resources that can serve as potential starting points for further learning. Building on this perspective, the study proposes the Salah-to-Kalam Continuum as a conceptual pathway connecting Arabic encountered and recited in religious practice with progressively more conscious and functional uses of the language: recognition and meaning-making, linguistic awareness, vocabulary activation, grammatical awareness, everyday communication, academic Arabic, and discipline-specific Arabic aligned with appropriate CEFR proficiency targets (Hidayat et al., 2026; Amiruddin, 2012).

This study therefore proposes Arabic as a lived language as a conceptual lens for reconceptualizing the starting point of Arabic learning in Islamic higher education. The concept does not suggest that religious practice automatically

produces Arabic proficiency. Instead, it highlights the possibility that repeated encounters with Arabic in meaningful religious contexts may create forms of familiarity, recognition, and memorized linguistic repertoire that can become resources for subsequent learning. The study further introduces the Salat-to-Kalam Continuum as a proposed conceptual pathway connecting this pre-existing repertoire and familiarity with progressively more conscious and functional uses of Arabic: from Arabic encountered and recited in religious practice, to recognition and meaning-making; linguistic awareness; vocabulary activation; grammatical awareness; everyday communication; academic Arabic; and finally discipline-specific Arabic aligned with appropriate CEFR proficiency targets.

The proposed continuum should therefore be understood as a conceptual proposition rather than an established causal theory. Its central argument is not that prayer makes students proficient in Arabic, but that the language already memorized and repeatedly recited in religious life may represent an overlooked starting resource. This resource may be diagnosed and activated pedagogically before students are guided toward broader communicative, academic, and disciplinary functions. Such a perspective shifts the central question from "How can students be taught Arabic from the beginning?" toward "What Arabic resources do students already possess, what do those resources actually mean for them, and how can they be developed into functional competence?"

Within this framework, CEFR remains important as a reference framework for defining proficiency targets and observable performance, while the learner's pre-existing repertoire and familiarity provide a basis for diagnosing the starting point. Communicative needs determine the immediate functional direction of learning, and discipline-specific needs determine the longer-term orientation of academic Arabic. Authentic assessment can then provide evidence of progression across receptive, productive, interactive, and mediational activities. Students who demonstrate sufficient readiness may progress toward broader communicative and academic tasks, whereas those who have not yet reached the expected threshold may receive Intensive Academic Support through targeted instruction, small-group mentoring, formative assessment, and additional opportunities for practice. In this model, differentiated support does not imply differentiated academic standards; rather, it reflects the principle of different starting points, differentiated support, and shared academic standards.

Accordingly, the central issue is not simply whether first-year students in Islamic higher education should attain A2 or B1 on the CEFR scale. It concerns how institutions can identify appropriate starting points, developmental pathways, and proficiency targets for learners with diverse educational backgrounds (M. Amiruddin et al., 2026). The proposed *Ṣalāh-to-Kalām*

Continuum is a conceptual proposition, not an established causal theory or a universal sequence. Its central argument is not that prayer makes students proficient in Arabic, but that Arabic encountered through religious practices may constitute an overlooked resource for further language learning. This resource requires diagnosis and pedagogical activation before it can be connected meaningfully to broader language use.

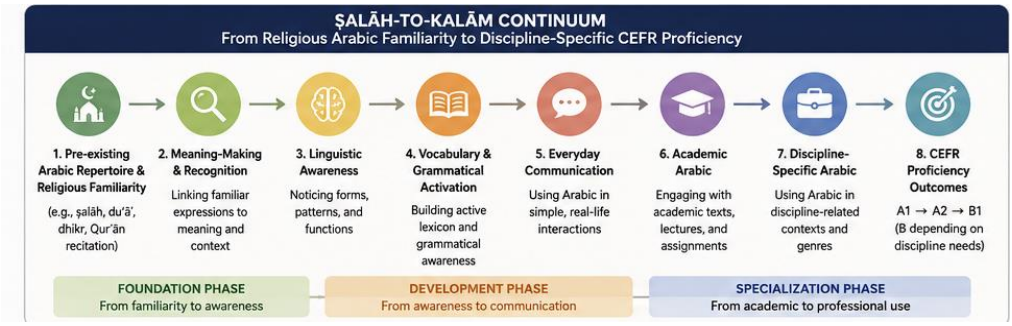


Figure 2. The *Salah*-to-*Kalam* Continuum

The *Ṣalāh*-to-*Kalām* Continuum refers to a conceptual pathway through which learners' familiarity with Arabic in ritual practices, particularly ṣalāh, may be recognized and activated as a resource for further language development. It connects the recognition and understanding of familiar expressions with linguistic awareness, vocabulary and grammatical development, everyday communication, academic Arabic, and discipline-specific language use. This pathway does not imply that religious familiarity automatically leads to communicative proficiency or that all learners follow an identical developmental sequence.

Within this framework, CEFR provides a reference for defining proficiency targets and describing observable performance, while learners' existing repertoires and religious familiarity inform the diagnosis of their starting points. Communicative needs guide immediate instructional priorities, whereas discipline-specific needs inform the development of academic Arabic. Authentic assessment can provide evidence of progress across receptive, productive, interactive, and mediational activities. Learners requiring further development may receive Intensive Academic Support through targeted instruction, small-group mentoring, formative assessment, and additional practice. Differentiated support, however, does not mean differentiated academic standards; it recognizes varied starting points while maintaining shared learning expectations.

The study makes three related contributions. Theoretically, it clarifies the distinction between religious familiarity, linguistic repertoire, and demonstrated language proficiency in Arabic learning within Islamic higher education (Noer et al., 2026; Amiruddin, 2024). Conceptually, it proposes the *Ṣalāh*-to-*Kalām* Continuum to relate lived religious Arabic to subsequent

communicative, academic, and discipline-specific language development. Practically, it offers a conceptual basis for repertoire-sensitive diagnosis, differentiated learning pathways, authentic assessment, and Intensive Academic Support during the first year of study. The continuum also provides a proposition that can be examined through subsequent empirical research.

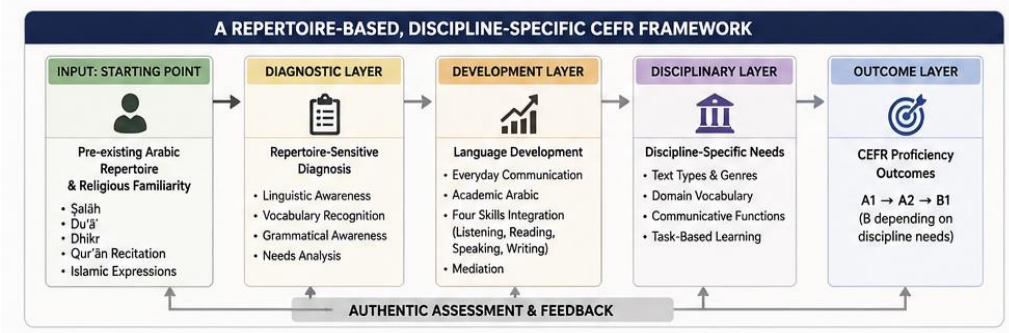


Figure 3. The Repertoire-to-Proficiency Framework

The framework illustrates the proposed relationships among learners' existing repertoires, diagnostic processes, language development, disciplinary alignment, CEFR outcomes, and authentic assessment. It shows how the identification of learners' starting resources can be connected to differentiated learning pathways and targeted proficiency outcomes.

Method

This study employed a qualitative conceptual research design supported by an integrative literature review to develop a CEFR-informed conceptual framework for Arabic language learning in Islamic higher education. Rather than testing causal relationships or measuring the effectiveness of an instructional intervention, the study synthesized theoretical and empirical insights concerning CEFR-oriented language education, Arabic as an additional language, Arabic for Specific Purposes (ASP), linguistic repertoire, translanguaging, religious language learning, and Islamic higher education. Conceptual research is appropriate for clarifying relationships among existing constructs and developing propositions for subsequent empirical examination (Jabareen, 2009; Rahmi & Arisnaini, 2025).

The review prioritized relevant literature published between 2016 and 2026, while retaining earlier seminal works where necessary to establish the conceptual foundations. Sources were identified primarily through Google Scholar and ResearchGate, supplemented by examination of reference lists in relevant publications. The selection considered the relevance of each publication to the study's conceptual focus and included Indonesian empirical studies, particularly those published in SINTA-indexed journals, as well as international literature from journals indexed in Scopus and/or Web of Science. These

indexing categories informed source prioritization; the databases themselves were not searched directly.

Selected references were organized using Mendeley. The CEFR Companion Volume served as a principal reference for proficiency descriptors, action-oriented language use, mediation, and interaction (Council of Europe, 2020).

The analysis proceeded through four interconnected stages. First, the literature was mapped thematically to identify key insights concerning proficiency frameworks, learners' starting resources, communicative needs, and discipline-specific Arabic. Second, the literature was critically synthesized to identify established findings, underexplored issues, inconsistencies, and conceptual relationships requiring further development. Third, the insights were integrated into a conceptual account connecting learners' existing Arabic repertoires and religious familiarity with linguistic awareness, communicative development, academic Arabic, discipline-specific needs, and CEFR-oriented proficiency targets. Finally, this synthesis informed the proposed Ṣalāh-to-Kalām Continuum and its relationship with discipline-specific CEFR targets.

The resulting framework underwent a conceptual coherence audit to examine whether its components were theoretically grounded, pedagogically plausible, and distinguishable from one another. Particular attention was given to distinguishing familiarity with religious Arabic from demonstrated language proficiency and avoiding the assumption that memorization or repeated recitation necessarily leads to communicative competence. The framework is therefore presented as a conceptual proposition, not an empirically validated model. Its empirical examination through diagnostic assessment, learner profiling, expert review, and longitudinal study remains a direction for subsequent research (Arifianto et al., 2021; Noer, 2025; Ainin, 2025).

Findings and Discussion

Conceptual Insight 1: The starting point should be reconceptualized from "zero proficiency" to pre-existing repertoire and religious familiarity

The first conceptual finding emerging from this literature synthesis is that first-year Muslim students in Islamic higher education should not automatically be conceptualized as linguistically empty or as sharing an identical starting point in Arabic learning. Instead, many enter university with a pre-existing Arabic repertoire developed through repeated engagement with Arabic in daily religious practices, including salat, supplication (*du`a*), *dhikr*, Qur'anic recitation, *azan* or the call to prayer, and other devotional activities (Arifah et al., 2024; Wekke, 2017; Zubaidah, 2020). Although this repertoire does not constitute communicative proficiency, it nevertheless represents a meaningful

linguistic resource that differentiates these learners from individuals who have had no prior exposure to Arabic.

This finding aligns with broader language-learning research, which recognizes that learners do not enter classrooms as blank slates but bring prior linguistic resources that shape subsequent learning. Studies on Arabic as an additional and heritage language demonstrate that learners can mobilize existing linguistic repertoires to negotiate meaning, develop metalinguistic awareness, and participate in interaction (Abourehab & Azaz, 2023; Schaefer, 2023; Uddin, 2024). In Islamic higher education, however, this prior resource differs from a conventional heritage-language repertoire because it is primarily constructed through sustained religious practice rather than everyday communicative interaction. Consequently, the repertoire is ritualized and spiritually embedded rather than communicatively developed.

The synthesis further reveals that this repertoire is authentic but inherently partial. Students may fluently recite expressions such as *Allahu akbar*, recognize *al-hamdu lillah*, or memorize substantial portions of the *tashahhud*, while still lacking the ability to construct simple sentences, interpret grammatical relationships, or engage in spontaneous Arabic conversation. Familiarity with religious expressions therefore should not be equated with functional language proficiency. Recognizing this distinction prevents two common misconceptions: treating students as absolute beginners despite their existing linguistic resources, or overestimating ritual familiarity as evidence of communicative competence.

This repertoire-based perspective is further reinforced by ecological approaches to Arabic language learning, which emphasize that proficiency develops through dynamic interactions among learners, teachers, learning environments, educational artifacts, and religious practices rather than through isolated cognitive processes alone (Nurcholis et al., 2025). At the same time, studies of *pesantren* indicate that Arabic instruction often remains heavily oriented toward grammatical accuracy and formal correctness, limiting opportunities to transform existing religious familiarity into communicative competence (Febriani et al., 2020). Collectively, these findings suggest that the learner's entry profile should be reconceptualized as a repertoire and religious familiarity profile rather than a zero-proficiency profile. Accordingly, placement testing should be complemented by repertoire-sensitive diagnostic assessment that identifies not only what students can currently perform, but also the linguistic resources they already possess and can activate to support future Arabic language development.

Conceptual Insight 2: From Religious familiarity to linguistic awareness, not equated with proficiency, then proposed Salat-to-Kalam pathway

The second conceptual finding is that religious familiarity should be treated as a potential pedagogical resource rather than as evidence of

proficiency. Repeated memorization and recitation of Arabic may create recognition, familiarity, and affective closeness to the language, yet these resources do not automatically translate into communicative competence. Recent work on translanguaging and linguistic repertoire supports the broader principle that learners can mobilize existing language resources to develop new linguistic knowledge, provided that instruction deliberately creates opportunities for noticing, reflection, and meaningful use (Abourehab & Azaz, 2023; Schaefer, 2023; Uddin, 2024).

On this basis, the proposed Salah-to-Kalam Continuum should be understood not as a claim that prayer directly causes proficiency, but as a pedagogical sequence through which familiar Arabic may be progressively transformed into conscious linguistic knowledge and functional language use. The sequence begins with Arabic encountered and recited in religious practice, moves toward recognition and meaning-making, then develops through vocabulary activation and grammatical awareness toward everyday communication, academic Arabic, and discipline-specific Arabic aligned with CEFR-oriented proficiency. Its theoretical importance lies in distinguishing exposure, familiarity, awareness, and proficiency as related but non-equivalent constructs. A learner may recognize a form without understanding its structure, understand a phrase without being able to produce it independently, or identify a grammatical pattern without using it spontaneously.

The continuum therefore represents a process of pedagogical transformation rather than an assumed automatic progression. At the same time, its conceptual strength lies in its testability: each stage can be examined empirically through diagnostic tasks, formative assessment, learner interviews, performance evidence, and longitudinal observation. In this sense, the continuum provides a bridge between Arabic as a lived language and Arabic as a formal subject of instruction, while also clarifying how familiar religious Arabic can be activated as a starting resource for broader communicative, academic, and disciplinary development. In addition, Schaefer et al. (2023) argue that Arabic instruction should place greater emphasis on pragmatic functions and meaningful interaction, while Uddin (2024) shows that translanguaging can help Arabic heritage learners make sense of lexical and grammatical forms during corrective feedback. Likewise, Abourehab and Azaz (2023) demonstrate that learners actively mobilize their repertoires to construct knowledge in multilingual learning spaces. These studies collectively indicate that familiarity becomes pedagogically valuable only when instruction creates space for guided noticing, explanation, and use.

Conceptual Insight 3: CEFR as a destination framework, not a starting point

The third conceptual finding concerns the role of CEFR as a destination framework rather than a starting point. The CEFR Companion Volume provides a robust action-oriented framework for describing what learners can do through reception, production, interaction, and mediation, while also positioning the learner as a social agent who uses language to accomplish meaningful tasks rather than as a passive recipient of grammatical content (Council of Europe, 2020).

Recent research on Arabic proficiency assessment shows that CEFR has become increasingly relevant to Arabic testing, proficiency mapping, and curriculum alignment in Indonesia. Maulani et al. (2024) mapped the Reference Level Description for Arabic proficiency tests in Indonesia, while Gazali and Saefuloh (2023) developed a receptive Arabic proficiency test instrument based on CEFR (Gazali & Saefuloh, 2023). More recent studies continue this line by classifying Arabic listening-test items according to CEFR levels and by developing beginner-level CEFR indicators for Arabic writing and speaking (Nurdianto et al., 2021; Ramadani et al., 2023). These developments are valuable because they improve transparency and comparability in proficiency standards.

However, the synthesis also suggests that CEFR should not be expected to explain the individual or contextual resources from which learners begin. CEFR describes levels of proficiency; it does not, by itself, determine where learners actually start or how their prior educational experience, familiarity, and repertoire should shape the pathway toward those levels. In this study, therefore, CEFR is treated as a reference for defining proficiency outcomes, while repertoire-sensitive diagnosis helps characterize the starting point. This distinction does not reduce CEFR's importance; rather, it places CEFR within a broader developmental architecture in which the starting point is informed by learners' repertoire, familiarity, prior educational experience, and current performance, the pathway is shaped by communicative needs and pedagogical progression, and the destination is articulated through CEFR-oriented targets.

The framework also helps explain why a single CEFR level may not be equally appropriate for all first-year students or all academic disciplines. A target such as B1 may be pedagogically ambitious and meaningful for some groups, while requiring additional time and Intensive Academic Support for others. The resulting model therefore advocates shared standards with differentiated pathways, rather than uniformity or unrestricted individualization.

Tabel. 1: Normal Target in one year as a new student (MABA) in PTAI

Academic Discipline	Arabic Need	Communicative Domain	Primary Skill	CEFR Target
PBA/BSA	Academic & linguistic	Academic	4 skills	B1+
PAI	Islamic texts & teaching	Academic/Professional	Reading + Speaking	B1
Islamic Law	Legal-religious texts	Academic	Reading + Mediation	A2–B1
Islamic Economic	Islamic economics	Professional	Reading + Interaction	A2–B1
Syariah Banking	Banking communication	Professional	Reading + Speaking	A2–B1
General Department	Basic Islamic literacy	Religious/Campus	Reading + Listening	A1–A2

Conceptual Insight 4: Discipline-specific needs should shape the progression beyond foundational Arabic

The fourth conceptual finding is that Arabic proficiency development should progressively move beyond general language competence toward discipline-specific purposes. Research on Arabic for Specific Purposes (ASP) demonstrates that learners' academic and professional domains shape the vocabulary, communicative situations, genres, and linguistic functions they require (Golfetto, 2020). Likewise, task-based research shows that authentic Arabic communication can be systematically organized around recurring communicative situations, core vocabulary, and grammatical structures that reflect real-world language use (Musling & Mohamed, 2025; Kasmantoni et al., 2022). These findings reinforce the ASP principle that language instruction should be aligned with the communicative functions learners are expected to perform rather than relying solely on a general proficiency scale.

In the context of Islamic higher education, this principle suggests that while all first-year students may share a common foundational Arabic pathway, their subsequent language development should become increasingly responsive to disciplinary needs. The Arabic requirements of students in Arabic Language Education or Arabic Literature differ substantially from those of students in Islamic Law, Islamic Economics, Islamic Banking, Psychology, Information Technology, or Engineering. Accordingly, the proposed developmental architecture is conceptualized as:

pre-existing repertoire and familiarity → foundational Arabic development → communicative Arabic → academic Arabic → discipline-specific Arabic → CEFR-aligned proficiency.

Within this framework, CEFR remains a common reference for describing proficiency, whereas disciplinary needs determine the contexts, tasks, genres, vocabulary, and communicative functions through which proficiency is developed and demonstrated.

The framework further advocates shared academic standards with differentiated learning pathways. Students who progress rapidly may advance to discipline-oriented learning. In contrast, those requiring additional time should receive Intensive Academic Support through diagnostic feedback, small-group tutoring, guided practice, portfolio-based learning, and formative reassessment. Differentiation therefore represents neither a lowering of standards nor fragmented curricula, but a pedagogically justified response to learners' diverse starting points, repertoire profiles, developmental trajectories, and future academic and professional language needs (Dianto et al., 2022).

Conceptual Insight 5. Summary of conceptual findings/Pedagogical implication: different starting points, differentiated support, shared academic standards

The integration of learner repertoire, religious familiarity, CEFR, and discipline-specific language needs has broader pedagogical implications for Arabic education in Islamic higher education. Rather than relying on a uniform placement model in which students follow the same curriculum and progression, institutions may benefit from a developmental framework that combines diagnostic placement, repertoire-sensitive profiling, foundational language development, authentic assessment, and differentiated academic support. In this model, the initial stage of learning focuses on transforming learners' existing religious familiarity into linguistic awareness and functional competence through meaning-oriented activities, vocabulary expansion, grammatical noticing, and communicative practice. Subsequent learning then progresses toward everyday communication, academic Arabic, and discipline-specific language aligned with learners' future academic and professional needs.

This pedagogical architecture is grounded in three interrelated propositions. First, first-year Muslim learners should be understood as entering Arabic learning with a pre-existing repertoire and varying degrees of religious familiarity rather than as absolute beginners (Arifah et al., 2024; Zubaidah, 2020). Second, this repertoire should not be equated with communicative proficiency, but it can be systematically transformed through a pedagogical sequence from recognition and meaning-making to linguistic awareness, vocabulary and grammatical activation, and communicative use (Schaefer, 2023; Uddin, 2024). Third, CEFR remains an essential reference for describing

proficiency outcomes, yet it functions most effectively when aligned with learners' starting resources and discipline-specific language needs rather than being applied as a stand-alone proficiency label (Little, 2016; Golfetto, 2020; Maulani et al., 2024). Consequently, the proposed Salat-to-Kalam Continuum offers a testable conceptual pathway linking lived religious Arabic with communicative, academic, and discipline-specific development. The overarching pedagogical principle is therefore different starting points, differentiated support, and shared academic standards, where learner progression is determined by observable performance and supported, when necessary, through Intensive Academic Support rather than reduced expectations.

Conclusion

This study argues that Arabic language learning in Islamic higher education should be reconceptualised from the learner's starting point rather than from an assumed zero baseline. First-year Muslim non-Arab learners may already possess a pre-existing Arabic repertoire formed through repeated religious practice, yet this repertoire should not be conflated with communicative proficiency. Recognizing the difference between repertoire, familiarity, and proficiency allows Arabic instruction to become more accurate, equitable, and pedagogically meaningful.

The proposed Salat-to-Kalam Continuum offers a conceptual pathway from religious familiarity to linguistic awareness, communicative use, academic Arabic, and discipline-specific Arabic. Its significance lies not in claiming that religious practice automatically produces proficiency, but in showing that prior Arabic experience can become a legitimate pedagogical resource when it is diagnosed and activated properly. CEFR remains essential as a proficiency reference, but it is most effective when aligned with learners' actual starting resources and disciplinary needs.

The central implication is that Arabic education may benefit from asking not only how far students are expected to progress, but also what linguistic resources they bring to the learning process. Attending to these starting points may inform curriculum design, placement decisions, and the formulation of realistic progression pathways and discipline-specific targets for first-year Arabic instruction. These implications remain conceptual propositions rather than empirically demonstrated outcomes of the present study and therefore warrant further investigation in diverse Islamic higher education contexts.

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Author Contributions Statement

M.Am. contributed to conceptualization, writing—original draft, formal analysis, data curation, and literature synthesis. M.Ai. contributed to supervision, conceptualization, and literature investigation. Sy. contributed to supervision, research design, methodology, and literature synthesis. Su. contributed to methodological refinement, data curation, and literature synthesis. URU contributed to literature investigation, data curation, writing—original draft, and language review. ARC contributed to writing—review and editing, and language review. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

AI Writing Statement

ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, and Consensus were used to assist with conceptual discussion, literature exploration, idea organization, and language refinement. The authors critically reviewed all AI-assisted outputs and took full responsibility for the manuscript's accuracy, integrity, and final content.

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