

P-ISSN: 2338-8617

E-ISSN: 2443-2067

*Jurnal Ilmiah*

# PEURADEUN

Vol. 13, No. 3, September 2025



**JIP**

The Indonesian Journal of the Social Sciences  
[www.journal.scadindependent.org](http://www.journal.scadindependent.org)  
DOI Prefix Number: 10.26811

INDEX COPERNICUS  
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**Developing a Competency-Based Arabic Curriculum to Foster *Merdeka Belajar* in Indonesian Madrasahs**

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**Article in Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun**

Available at : <https://journal.scadindependent.org/index.php/jipeuradeun/article/view/1930>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.26811/peuradeun.v13i3.1930>

**How to Cite this Article**

APA : Raswan, R., Husni, A., Mudhofir, I., Qodri, M., Husein, S.Y., Muradi, A., & Ashfia, A. (2025). Developing a Competency-Based Arabic Curriculum to Foster *Merdeka Belajar* in Indonesian Madrasahs. *Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun*, 13(3), 1881-1908. <https://doi.org/10.26811/peuradeun.v13i3.1930>

Others Visit : <https://journal.scadindependent.org/index.php/jipeuradeun>

Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun (JIP), *the Indonesian Journal of the Social Sciences*, is a leading peer-reviewed and open-access journal, which publishes scholarly works, and specializes in the Social Sciences that emphasize contemporary Asian issues with interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches. JIP is published by SCAD Independent and published 3 times a year (January, May, and September) with p-ISSN: 2338-8617 and e-ISSN: 2443-2067. JIP has become a CrossRef member. Therefore, all articles published will have a unique DOI number. JIP has been accredited Rank 1 (Sinta 1) by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, the Republic of Indonesia, through the Decree of the Director-General of Higher Education, Research, and Technology No. 72/E/KPT/2024, dated April 1, 2024. This accreditation is valid until the May 2027 edition.

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JIP indexed/included in Web of Science, Scopus, Sinta, MAS, Index Copernicus International, Erih Plus, Garuda, Moraref, Scilit, Sherpa/Romeo, Google Scholar, OAJI, PKP, Index, Crossref, BASE, ROAD, GIF, Advanced Science Index, JournalTOCs, ISI, SIS, ESJI, SSRN, ResearchGate, Mendeley and [others](#).





## DEVELOPING A COMPETENCY-BASED ARABIC CURRICULUM TO FOSTER MERDEKA BELAJAR IN INDONESIAN MADRASAHs

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<b>Received:</b> September 11, 2024	<b>Accepted:</b> August 27, 2025	<b>Published:</b> September 30, 2025
<b>Article Url:</b> <a href="https://journal.scadindependent.org/index.php/jipeuradeun/article/view/1930">https://journal.scadindependent.org/index.php/jipeuradeun/article/view/1930</a>		

### Abstract

*This study examined the development and implementation of a competency-based Arabic curriculum in Indonesian madrasahs and its implications for students' learning independence. Employing a qualitative case study design complemented by a descriptive student survey, data were collected through interviews with teachers and principals, classroom observations, and student responses. The findings demonstrated that the curriculum significantly enhanced students' motivation, enjoyment, and comprehension of Arabic, with 85% reporting greater motivation, 80% increased enjoyment, and 75% improved understanding. Teachers and principals affirmed that the competency-based approach facilitated the design of more relevant materials, clearer assessments, and adaptive teaching strategies, while observations revealed more dynamic student engagement and collaborative learning. Integrating the principles of Merdeka Belajar, the curriculum promoted learner autonomy and contextualized language use, though challenges remained in addressing diverse learning styles and teacher readiness. The study highlighted the novelty of explicitly linking linguistic proficiency with critical thinking, cultural literacy, and real-world application within a faith-based educational context. These insights not only enrich discussions on competency-based education in Islamic schools but also provide a practical model adaptable to other Muslim-majority countries and multilingual environments.*

**Keywords:** *Competency-Based Curriculum; Arabic Language; Merdeka Belajar; Madrasah.*

## A. Introduction

The curriculum plays a central role in the educational process, including in Arabic language learning, as it provides structured objectives, content, and methods that guide teaching and learning practices (Muradi et al., 2022; Saputra, 2024). In Indonesia, Arabic has long been associated with religious education due to its status as the language of the Qur'an, leading to curricula that initially emphasized mastery of worship-related texts (Ni'am, 2022). This early orientation made instruction primarily focused on understanding classical religious texts and Islamic law. Over time, however, the scope of Arabic education has broadened. While traditional curricula were confined to religious contexts, recent reforms have shifted towards broader communication skills that meet academic, professional, and social demands (Munawaroh & Kosim, 2021).

In contemporary Indonesian education, Arabic plays an increasingly diverse role. In *pesantren*, Arabic remains central for accessing classical Islamic scholarship (Rahman & Maisurah, 2024). In contrast, in general madrasah education, it functions as a foundational subject supporting intellectual and cultural development (Mustaqiim & Azani, 2024). This transformation reflects Arabic's broader global relevance in science, technology, and international discourse (Rozak, 2018). To strengthen this position, curriculum reforms at the madrasah level have emphasized competency-based approaches that integrate practical skills with real-world application (Tajuddin, 2017; Nurdianto, 2020). As a result, Arabic education now seeks to build not only linguistic proficiency but also critical thinking, cultural awareness, and problem-solving abilities (Edidarmo & Fudhaili, 2023; Thohri, 2024).

Introducing Arabic early in basic education helps students build a foundation for engaging with religious texts and Islamic practices (Andriani, 2015). The competency-based curriculum (CBC) strengthens this process through structured and outcome-oriented models that prioritize practical competencies over rote memorization (Nuraini, 2019). By targeting skills such as reading comprehension and vocabulary mastery, CBC increases student engagement and ensures the applicability of language skills across both religious and social contexts (Rovisnuhaji et al., 2024; Roviin, 2018).

Thus, the integration of CBC into Arabic education reflects a paradigm shift from text-centered to competency-centered learning.

Despite these efforts, Arabic language learning in Indonesia still faces serious challenges. Many studies highlight persistent obstacles such as ineffective teaching methods, limited resources, and low student motivation (Hafiz & Lukluk, 2024). In *pesantren*, difficulties often arise in teaching mufradat (vocabulary) and muhadasah (conversation), while in madrasahs, similar challenges limit students' ability to achieve deep proficiency (Jailani, 2021). These problems underscore the need for curriculum models that are not only theoretically sound but also practically effective and adaptable to diverse student needs.

Theoretical perspectives provide useful lenses for addressing these challenges. Bandura's Social Learning Theory emphasizes that learning occurs through observation, imitation, and modeling within social contexts (Davis, 2002). In Arabic classrooms, peer modeling of pronunciation, sentence construction, and learning attitudes significantly shapes students' communicative competence. Krashen's Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory further supports this view, particularly his Input Hypothesis, which underscores the role of level-appropriate input in natural acquisition (Flavia & Padmanabha, 2024; Pauzan, 2024). Yet, barriers predicted by the Affective Filter Hypothesis – such as anxiety and low self-confidence – remain critical, especially in speaking tasks. Multilingualism theory also informs Arabic acquisition, as Indonesian and local languages serve both as scaffolds for comprehension and as potential barriers to immersion when overused.

Policy frameworks in Indonesia have also shaped Arabic curriculum reform. The *Merdeka Belajar* initiative, rooted in constructivist principles, promotes learner autonomy, contextualization, and creativity (Santosa, 2022; Mazid et al., 2021). This policy encourages the design of adaptive curricula that empower students to explore subjects through project-based and differentiated instruction (Yusuf & Arfiansyah, 2021; Supardi & Malihah, 2022). In practice, Arabic education has begun integrating such methods to develop linguistic, affective, and psychomotor competencies (Febriani & Bedra, 2023). When aligned with ACTFL standards, these reforms address diverse proficiency levels and cultural



competencies (Asy'ari et al., 2024). Nonetheless, implementation remains uneven across institutions due to differences in teacher preparedness, institutional resources, and student backgrounds (Irhamisyah, 2023; Winarti & Fauziah, 2023).

This orientation resonates with the broader international discourse on learner autonomy and independent learning, even though in Indonesia it is formally articulated through the national policy framework known as *Merdeka Belajar* (Samsudi et al., 2024; Saminan et al., 2024). By connecting national reforms with global concepts of learner autonomy, the Indonesian experience contributes a unique perspective to international discussions on curriculum innovation in faith-based and multilingual education systems.

Previous research has examined Arabic language learning from various perspectives, but the majority remains limited in scope. Studies often focus on specific components, such as vocabulary instruction or teaching media (Jailani, 2021), or highlight obstacles in *pesantren* settings (Hafiz & Lukluk, 2024). Other works analyze theoretical models or pedagogical approaches without providing a systematic evaluation of their application in practice (Rudisunhaji et al., 2024; Maghfurin et al., 2023). While these contributions are valuable, they do not yet offer comprehensive insights into how competency-based curricula affect measurable learning outcomes such as student motivation, engagement, and independence.

Although Arabic curriculum development has been widely discussed, few studies have systematically analyzed the implementation of competency-based Arabic curricula in Indonesian madrasahs. Much of the existing literature emphasizes syllabus design, historical development, or isolated teaching challenges without evaluating how CBC shapes learning experiences in holistic and measurable ways. Moreover, research rarely integrates CBC with the *Merdeka Belajar* framework, especially in terms of its impact on student motivation, autonomy, and learning independence. This leaves unanswered how a context-specific CBC can simultaneously advance linguistic proficiency, critical thinking, and cultural literacy while remaining faithful to the religious and socio-cultural environment of Indonesian madrasahs.



This study seeks to address that gap by evaluating a competency-based Arabic curriculum model developed for madrasahs. The novelty of this research lies in its explicit integration of linguistic proficiency, cultural competence, and real-world application within a faith-based educational framework. Unlike prior studies, it systematically operationalizes competency-based principles into structured curriculum design aligned with *Merdeka Belajar*, supported by measurable outcomes and adaptable strategies.

By employing a qualitative case study approach enriched with survey data, this study not only demonstrates the effectiveness of CBC in improving students' motivation and learning independence but also provides a framework for curriculum evaluation that is adaptable to other Muslim-majority and multilingual contexts. In doing so, it contributes to both local curriculum development in Indonesia and global discourse on competency-based education in religious schools.

## **B. Method**

The research employs a qualitative approach with a case study design, chosen for its suitability in exploring the development and evaluation of a competency-based Arabic curriculum in madrasahs. This approach allows for an in-depth investigation of the curriculum's implementation within a specific educational context, providing rich insights into the experiences of both students and educators. The case study focuses on Arabic language teachers, principals, and curriculum experts, as well as students, offering a comprehensive view of the curriculum's effectiveness and its impact on the learning process. The research subjects were selected based on specific inclusion criteria, such as their direct involvement in Arabic language education, with a total of 15 teachers, 5 principals and 300 students participating.

Data collection utilized three main techniques: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and a simple student satisfaction survey. The survey was designed as a supplementary instrument to enrich qualitative findings, focusing on descriptive feedback rather than inferential statistical analysis. It consisted of straightforward, close-ended and Likert-scale questions



aimed at capturing students' self-reported experiences, including motivation, enjoyment, and perceived effectiveness of the curriculum. Given its descriptive nature, the survey did not require formal validity testing, complex measurement scales, or advanced statistical processing; results were presented in the form of frequency distributions and percentages to complement the qualitative data.

For data analysis, a thematic approach was used. The process began with manual transcription of interviews and field notes, followed by initial open coding to identify key ideas. Codes were then grouped into categories based on similarities and recurring patterns, and from these, broader themes were developed. This process was carried out manually without the use of data analysis software. To ensure data validity and trustworthiness, the researcher employed triangulation by comparing findings across interviews, observations, and survey results. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with participants to confirm accuracy. Peer debriefing with fellow researchers was also used to reduce bias and strengthen interpretation.

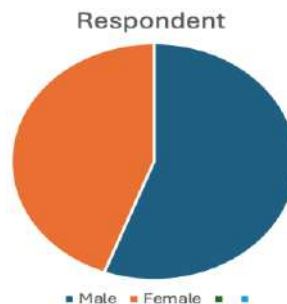
## **C. Result and Discussion**

The implementation of the competency-based Arabic curriculum in Madrasahs was evaluated through various data sources, including student satisfaction surveys, interviews with educators, and classroom observations. The goal of this section is to present the key findings regarding the impact of the new curriculum on students' learning experiences and the overall effectiveness of the curriculum in enhancing their Arabic language skills.

### **1. Result**

The student satisfaction survey was conducted with a total of 300 respondents, consisting of madrasah students participating in Arabic language learning. The survey did not differentiate responses based on gender, as the focus was on capturing overall perceptions of the curriculum's implementation.





*Figure 1. Gender classification*

Research results regarding the implementation of the competency-based Arabic curriculum in Madrasahs show a significant positive impact on students' learning experience. Based on student satisfaction surveys, 85% of students reported feeling more motivated to learn Arabic after the new curriculum was implemented, while 80% of students enjoyed learning more and 75% felt the curriculum helped them understand Arabic better. Qualitative data from interviews revealed that teachers observed higher engagement and participation during Arabic lessons, attributed to the curriculum's focus on practical and relevant skills. Principals highlighted that the competency-based approach aligns better with students' learning needs, leading to noticeable improvements in classroom dynamics. Observations corroborated these findings, showing increased student interaction and enthusiasm during lessons.

*Table 1. Results of student satisfaction survey on the implementation of competency-based curriculum*

Aspect Evaluation	Frequency	Percentage
Feel more motivated	255	85%
Enjoy learning	240	80%
Feel the curriculum is effective	225	75%
No change	30	10%
Feel less motivated	15	5%
Not enjoying learning	15	5%
Feels the curriculum is not effective	15	5%

The results from the Student Satisfaction Survey (Table 1) align with the feedback provided by teachers and principals regarding the implementation of the competency-based curriculum. A significant percentage of students,

85%, reported feeling more motivated, while 80% expressed enjoying their learning experience. These positive outcomes support the observations made by teachers, who noted increased student engagement following the curriculum's introduction. The emphasis on clear and measurable competencies provided teachers with a structured approach to assess progress, and the tailored teaching strategies led to the development of more relevant and engaging learning materials. The high satisfaction rates in the survey, including the 75% of students who felt the curriculum was effective, demonstrate that the competency-based curriculum not only improved student motivation and enjoyment but also contributed to a more impactful learning experience, particularly in language education. During classroom observation, the atmosphere was noticeably more active compared to lessons before the curriculum change. In one lesson, groups of four to five students clustered around vocabulary-matching cards. Laughter and short exchanges in Arabic mixed with Indonesian as students tried to negotiate meaning together. For instance, when a student hesitated with a term, her peers quickly explained, shifting between languages until understanding was reached. This dynamic interaction reflects both collaborative learning principles and the way the curriculum grounds abstract concepts in concrete activities. The teacher, ATH, moved steadily from group to group, kneeling beside desks to provide quiet, individualized feedback. She noted in the interview:

*"The new curriculum is very helpful in designing materials that are more in line with students' needs. I find it easier to evaluate student progress because the curriculum emphasizes clear and measurable competency achievement. The learning materials also feel more relevant and applicable to students' daily lives. This makes learning more interesting and makes it easier for students to understand language concepts better"* (Interview with ATH, 2024).

Another principal emphasized:

*"I notice that students are more active in group discussions and more confident in trying to express their ideas. Even those who were usually quiet now contribute, which shows that the approach is giving them space to engage more meaningfully"* (Interview with HF, 2024).

Her reflections aligned with what was visible in the classroom: even students who previously appeared disengaged leaned forward in their groups, following instructions carefully, and occasionally smiling when they succeeded in matching words correctly. These small but consistent indicators of enthusiasm illustrate how the curriculum's emphasis on meaningful application fostered motivation, beyond what the survey percentages alone could convey.

The perspective of principals further contextualized these findings. One principal emphasized that the competency-based curriculum, especially when integrated with the *Merdeka Belajar* principles, gave teachers greater flexibility to tailor instruction. This flexibility was seen as crucial in a madrasah setting, where student backgrounds and prior exposure to Arabic vary widely. According to the principal, the structured competencies provided teachers with clarity, while the autonomy embedded in *Merdeka Belajar* encouraged innovation and responsiveness to student diversity.

Classroom observations supported these insights, revealing that students actively participated in lessons designed around their individual needs and interests. For instance, during an observed Arabic lesson focused on conversational practice, students enthusiastically engaged in role-playing activities. This practical approach not only increased participation but also enhanced their confidence in using the language in real-life contexts.

During one observation session, BA, a mid-career Arabic language teacher, stood at the front of the classroom while students worked in pairs on a role-play activity simulating a market conversation in Arabic. As BA walked between the rows, she occasionally paused to listen, offering corrective feedback in a soft but encouraging tone. She later reflected on how the new curriculum had reshaped her teaching practice:

*"One of the biggest advantages of the new curriculum is its ability to customize learning materials to the individual needs of students. This helps to create a more dynamic learning environment that is responsive to students' various learning styles"* (Interview with BA, 2024).

Her statement was not an abstract claim—it was observable in the classroom. Students were not bound to identical worksheets; instead, each



group had variations in vocabulary lists and dialogue prompts tailored to their proficiency level. Some groups rehearsed confidently without notes, while others relied on written cues, illustrating how differentiated materials allowed each learner to progress at a comfortable pace.

Although the majority of students reported increased motivation and enjoyment in learning, it is important to explore the reasons behind the negative responses from the small minority of students who felt less motivated or believed the curriculum was ineffective. These students, who accounted for 5% of the survey respondents, may have faced specific challenges that affected their engagement with the competency-based curriculum. The reasons behind the negative responses from a small number of students who felt less motivated or found the curriculum ineffective could stem from several factors. One possibility is that these students may have had different learning styles or needs that were not fully addressed by the competency-based approach. For instance, students who thrive in a more traditional, teacher-centered learning environment may have struggled with the shift to a more student-centered approach, where they are expected to take greater responsibility for their learning. Additionally, some students might have found the materials either too challenging or not sufficiently engaging, leading to a feeling of disconnect with the content.

Classroom observations revealed that students participated more enthusiastically in activities that were tailored to their individual learning needs and styles. The competency-based approach facilitated more interactive and participatory learning experiences, leading to a noticeable increase in student engagement and activity during lessons. The implementation of the competency-based Arabic curriculum in Madrasahs has also been significantly enhanced by the principles of *Merdeka Belajar*. This educational reform, initiated by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture, emphasizes student-centered learning and the development of competencies over traditional rote memorization. As a result, students have experienced a more personalized and flexible learning environment that aligns closely with their individual needs and interests.

Under the *Merdeka Belajar* framework, the competency-based curriculum has encouraged a shift from rigid, uniform teaching methods to more adaptable and engaging practices. This has led to a more meaningful learning experience, where students are given the freedom to explore subjects at their own pace and according to their personal interests. The emphasis on student autonomy and tailored learning paths has significantly contributed to the increased motivation and enjoyment reported by students. They are now able to engage more deeply with the Arabic language, as the curriculum allows them to connect their learning with real-life contexts and practical applications.

Teachers have found that *Merdeka Belajar* complements the competency-based approach by offering greater flexibility in designing learning activities and assessments. This flexibility has enabled educators to create more dynamic and responsive lesson plans that cater to diverse learning styles and paces. Consequently, teachers are better equipped to support individual student growth and development, leading to more effective teaching and learning outcomes. The integration of these principles has facilitated a more interactive classroom environment where students actively participate and take ownership of their learning journey.

In exploring the implementation of the competency-based curriculum integrated with the *Merdeka Belajar* principle, classroom observations and interviews provided vivid insights into how these reforms were translated into practice.

During one morning Arabic lesson, ATH, an experienced teacher, moved between clusters of students who were working on a vocabulary categorization task. Her desk was covered with laminated word cards, each tailored to different proficiency levels. Pausing beside a group struggling to pronounce new terms, she offered gentle corrections and encouraged them to create simple sentences from the words. Reflecting on this shift in her practice, MJ, a teacher, explained that:

*"The application of the competency-based curriculum integrated with the principle of 'Merdeka Belajar' has really changed the way I design teaching materials. With the flexibility provided by 'Merdeka Belajar,' I can adjust the material to the needs and interests of individual students. This makes*



*learning more relevant and interesting for them. The new curriculum also makes it easier for me to assess student progress because the competencies are clear and measurable, which allows me to provide more specific and useful feedback” (Interview with MJ, 2024).*

Similarly, FA, the head of the madrasah, shared her perspective during a break between classes. We sat in her modest office, where a stack of student project portfolios lay on her desk – ranging from illustrated Arabic storybooks to short video presentations. She pointed to one example created by a group of intermediate-level students, explaining how the task was designed to reflect their personal interests while meeting competency benchmarks. As she summarized:

*“One of the biggest advantages of the new curriculum is its ability to customize teaching materials according to students’ individual needs. The ‘Merdeka Belajar’ principle supports this approach by providing freedom in the way materials are delivered and assessed. This helps to create a learning environment that is more dynamic and responsive to students’ various learning styles. As a result, students feel more motivated and enjoy their learning process because they can relate the teaching materials to their real-life context” (Interview with FA, 2024).*

The scenes in MJ’s classroom and the examples from FA’s collection illustrate how the competency-based curriculum, when paired with the flexibility of *Merdeka Belajar*, transforms learning into a more personalized, engaging, and contextually relevant experience.

The results of the student satisfaction survey regarding the implementation of a competency-based curriculum integrated with the principle of *Merdeka Belajar* show a significant positive impact. The data from this survey reflects a clear increase in students’ motivation and satisfaction with the Arabic learning process after the implementation of the new curriculum.

Table 2. Results of student satisfaction survey on the implementation of competency-based curriculum and the principle of *Merdeka Belajar*

Aspect Evaluation	Percentage
Feel more motivated	87%
Enjoy learning	83%



Aspect Evaluation	Percentage
Feel the curriculum is effective	78%
No change	9%
Feel less motivated	4%
Not enjoying learning	6%
Feels the curriculum is not effective	7%

Survey results from a second round of implementation (Table 2) showed slightly higher levels of motivation (87%) and enjoyment (83%), as well as perceived effectiveness (78%). When triangulated with interview and observation data, these results suggest that the integration of *Merdeka Belajar* did not merely add flexibility but also enhanced students' sense of ownership in learning. For example, one group of students was observed negotiating which role each member would take in a role-play exercise. Instead of waiting for teacher direction, they divided tasks themselves—one took the role of shopkeeper, another as customer, while others acted as observers giving feedback on vocabulary use. This illustrates how the principle of autonomy in learning translated into practice.

Nevertheless, not all experiences were positive. Approximately 9% of students reported no change, 4% felt less motivated, and 6% did not enjoy the process. A closer look at classroom interactions suggested that some students with weaker foundational skills in Arabic struggled to keep up, even within the competency-based framework. Teachers acknowledged this challenge, noting that differentiation strategies were still developing and required additional training. As one teacher expressed:

*"We realize that students' abilities are very diverse. Some grasp the material very quickly, but there are also those who are left behind, especially those with weak foundations in Arabic. Therefore, we still need a lot of training so that differentiation strategies can truly be implemented in the classroom"* (Interview with BM, 2024).

These nuances remind us that survey data alone can mask important variations in student experience. Quantitative figures may suggest overall improvement, but without qualitative insights, the struggles of particular groups of students risk being overlooked. As one madrasah principal emphasized:



*"The survey numbers do show a positive trend, but behind them there are still students who struggle to follow the lessons. As school leaders, we see the importance of providing additional support for teachers so that they can adjust their teaching methods to the students' conditions" (Interview with JA, 2024).*

Such reflections illustrate why integrating classroom observations, teacher interviews, and principal perspectives is crucial to reveal the complexity behind student responses and ensure that curriculum reform benefits all learners. The triangulated evidence reveals that the competency-based curriculum in Arabic language learning at madrasahs has significantly increased motivation and engagement. However, its success is deeply tied to contextual factors: how teachers adapt the curriculum, how students collaborate, and how institutional support aligns with the vision of *Merdeka Belajar*.

For instance, some students expressed difficulty adapting to the increased emphasis on individual competencies, which required them to take greater responsibility for their learning. Others mentioned that while the materials were relevant, they sometimes felt overwhelming due to the higher expectations for active participation and application of knowledge.

Similarly, teacher interviews revealed challenges in implementing the curriculum for students with varied learning paces and styles, particularly those accustomed to more traditional, rote-based methods. In one observed lesson, DB guided her class through a listening comprehension activity using short Arabic dialogues. While some students quickly completed the task and began discussing answers with peers, a few sat quietly, their eyes shifting between the audio player and the teacher, struggling to catch key words. Noticing this, DB paused the activity, replayed the recording at a slower speed, and broke the task into smaller steps.

*"Although the competency-based curriculum provides clarity, some students struggle to keep up, especially those who are used to traditional rote learning methods. It takes extra effort to ensure these students remain engaged and do not feel left behind" (Interview with DB, 2024).*

Her experience highlights a tension in the new curriculum's implementation—while its structure and measurable competencies offer clarity for most learners, those with lower initial proficiency or rigid learning habits risk disengagement. In such cases, tailored strategies such as differentiated instruction, targeted mentoring sessions, or scaffolded learning tasks become essential to bridge the gap.

## **2. Discussion**

The implementation of competency-based curriculum in language education, especially Arabic and English, has a promising impact but is not without serious challenges in practice. The curriculum is designed to foster language skills and prepare students for global dynamics (Maghfurin et al., 2023), but the gap between conceptual design and classroom implementation remains a major problem (Rudisunhaji et al., 2024). Although the underlying theories of constructivism—such as those proposed by Piaget and Vygotsky—advocate an active learning approach, student responses are not always equally positive. Some students still feel unmotivated and do not enjoy the learning process, which indicates that the connection between learning experiences and individual needs has not been fully formed. This indicates an unequal distribution of curriculum benefits due to suboptimal learning differentiation and teachers' readiness to manage differences in learning styles and student backgrounds (Musyafak & Subhi, 2023).

The CBLT approach carried out in this curriculum emphasizes authentic tasks, practical skills, and competency-based assessments (Boukhentache, 2020; Ouali & Benaouira, 2022). However, in its implementation, many teachers have difficulty transitioning from conventional instructional methods to the role of facilitators. Lack of intensive training, limited resources, and administrative burden are significant obstacles that have not been adequately explored in previous studies. In addition, assessments of competency achievements are still often not supported by appropriate and flexible measurement tools, especially to assess communication and problem-solving skills in a real context. If these challenges are not addressed systematically, then the potential of



the curriculum to form independent and adaptive learners will be difficult to realize comprehensively.

Competency-based curriculum prioritizes the acquisition of practical skills and the application of knowledge in everyday situations. This focus is a direct reflection of constructivist principles, which argue that learning is most effective when students are able to relate new knowledge to their existing understanding and use it in meaningful ways (Nurdin & Hafidzi, 2023). For example, students who learn Arabic through this curriculum are encouraged to apply their language skills in real-life scenarios, such as communicating with peers, participating in community activities, or engaging with Arabic texts in their daily lives (Salsabila & Setiawan, 2024). This approach not only improves language proficiency but also reinforces the relevance of learning by connecting it to students' personal experiences.

Vygotsky's emphasis on social interaction and collaborative learning is strongly reflected in the implementation of competency-based curricula. Classroom observations show that group activities, peer reviews, and collaborative projects are not only present but also serve as the main mechanisms through which students learn from one another. This confirms Vygotsky's notion that social interaction plays a central role in cognitive development (Tudge, 1990). The findings also indicate that such collaborative approaches directly enhance communication skills, thereby providing empirical support for the constructivist claim that knowledge is co-constructed in social contexts (Mali & A. Kamble, 2020). Thus, the curriculum operationalizes social learning principles rather than merely adopting them as theoretical ideals.

Constructivist principles are further validated in the area of assessment. Traditional memorization-based tests have been replaced with evaluations emphasizing the application of knowledge in diverse contexts (Puri et al., 2023). Teachers' use of formative assessments aligns with the constructivist idea that feedback and reflection are integral to learning. Field data – where students reported greater motivation and engagement – demonstrates how this cycle of continuous feedback nurtures a growth mindset, echoing Combefis & Van Den Schrieck (2021) view that learning is a process of ongoing

improvement. In this way, the evidence shows that the constructivist theory is not only theoretically plausible but also practically effective in supporting student development.

Findings from the survey showed that 85% of students felt more motivated and 80% enjoyed learning more after the new curriculum was implemented supporting learning motivation theories, especially intrinsic and extrinsic motivation theories. According to the motivational theory Self-Determination Theory (SDT) proposed by Deci and Ryan, intrinsic motivation is related to basic human needs for autonomy, connectedness, and competence (Salsabila & Budiman, 2023). A competency-based curriculum that emphasizes skill achievement and the relevance of the material to daily life can increase students' sense of competence, thereby increasing their intrinsic motivation (Pangesti & Mujiburrohmah, 2023). This is reflected in survey data that shows an increase in motivation and enjoyment in learning. When students perceive the material as relevant and experience clear progress, they feel more competent, which increases their engagement and enjoyment of learning (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Additionally, the curriculum's emphasis on personalized learning and real-world applications supports students' autonomy, allowing them to engage with content in a way that aligns with their preferred interests and learning styles (Ruzek et al., 2016). In this sense, the data not only aligns with but also expands SDT's framework by highlighting how competence and autonomy may lead to stronger social connectedness in practice.

Classroom observations and interviews with teachers revealed that the curriculum also facilitates a learning approach that is more responsive to the individual needs of students. This approach is in line with the theory of learning differentiation proposed by Carol Ann Tomlinson. Learning differentiation emphasizes the importance of adapting teaching materials and methods to meet the diverse needs of students, and the competency-based curriculum applied allows teachers to design activities that suit students' skill levels and interests (Sarnoto, 2024; Nur Hakim et al., 2024).

Teachers report that the applicable materials and diverse activities designed in the new curriculum help them assess and meet the individual



needs of students, improving engagement and learning outcomes (Wardiyah et al., 2023). Teachers note that the flexibility in this curriculum has significantly improved their ability to meet the specific learning needs of students. By combining relevant materials and offering a variety of activities that cater to different learning styles and levels, the curriculum allows teachers to provide more personalized instruction (Samsudi et al., 2024). This adaptability not only helps in accurately assessing each student's progress but also improves their engagement and overall learning outcomes. The ability to match instructional strategies to students' unique needs fosters a more inclusive and effective learning environment, demonstrating the success of the curriculum in supporting diverse learners and enhancing the educational experience (Sopian et al., 2025).

The principles of active learning theory, as introduced by David Kolb, are particularly relevant to competency-based curricula, especially in the way they emphasize hands-on experience and reflection as central components of effective learning (Saipon & Sumantri, 2023; Rekan et al., 2025). Kolb's theory argues that learning is most effective when students engage in cycles of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. The new competency-based curriculum combines activities such as language games and real-life situation simulations, which align with Kolb's principles by immersing students in practical, hands-on experience. These activities provide students with a valuable opportunity to practice and apply their language skills in a context that reflects real-world scenarios. This approach not only improves students' language proficiency but also deepens their understanding of how language is used in everyday interactions (Nadwi, 2022; Rekan et al., 2025). By engaging in these experiential learning activities, students can reflect on their experiences, adjust their understanding, and apply their skills more effectively, thereby strengthening their language understanding and improving their ability to use them in practical situations (Umkabu & Lestari, 2023). This alignment with active learning theory underscores the effectiveness of the curriculum in fostering a more engaging and relevant learning environment that supports deeper and more meaningful learning outcomes.



The effectiveness of the curriculum in improving students' understanding of Arabic is evident, with 78% of students reporting better understanding of the language. These results reflect the success of the curriculum in offering a clear, structured, and coherent approach to language teaching. An emphasis on competency-based learning helps students achieve measurable milestones, which in turn facilitates a deeper understanding of the subject matter. This structured approach supports more effective language acquisition and implementation.

However, not all feedback is very positive. A small percentage of students—9%—reported no significant changes in their learning experience, while 4% felt less motivated, 6% did not enjoy the learning process, and 7% found the curriculum ineffective. These concerns, while minor, highlight areas where the curriculum may need to be further refined. Addressing these issues is critical to ensuring that all students benefit equally from educational reform and that the curriculum effectively meets diverse needs.

While the overall positive impact of competency-based curriculum is proven, it is important to acknowledge that a minority of students report lower levels of satisfaction. However, these negative responses are not thoroughly examined to understand the underlying causes, such as potential mismatches between curriculum content and individual student learning preferences or the adequacy of teacher training in implementing new methodologies. Similarly, the difficulties faced by teachers—such as adapting to facilitative roles, managing diverse learning paces, or overcoming resource constraints—are not adequately addressed.

This dissatisfaction suggests that there is variation in individual experiences, which may be influenced by factors such as different learning styles, diverse backgrounds, and personal preferences (Kiill, 2023). This variation highlights the need for a more nuanced approach to differentiation in the curriculum. To address these differences and improve the overall effectiveness of the curriculum, further differentiation strategies can be implemented. This may include providing additional support tailored to individual learning needs, offering a broader range of instructional methods, and incorporating



feedback mechanisms to better accommodate diverse student experiences. Additionally, additional research is essential to explore the specific factors that contribute to the negative experiences reported by this minority of students. Understanding these factors will help identify targeted strategies to increase their satisfaction and ensure that all students can get the maximum benefit from the curriculum (Taylor, 2017; Ajmal & Al Rasyid, 2023).

The survey results are consistent with the theoretical foundation of *Merdeka Belajar*, which emphasizes student-centered learning and flexibility in education (Alfaruki, 2022). In principle, *Merdeka Belajar* encourages students to take ownership of their learning experience, with a focus on autonomy, relevance, and personal engagement – values that align closely with constructivist theory (Arung et al., 2023).

Unlike public schools under the Ministry of Education, madrasahs operate within the curricular framework of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, where religious studies form a substantial portion of instructional time and where Arabic is often positioned not only as a foreign language but as a language of religious scholarship. As such, the flexibility promised by *Merdeka Belajar* is mediated by the need to meet nationally mandated religious curriculum standards. For example, while competency-based modules can allow thematic customization, the selection of topics and vocabulary is frequently tied to classical Islamic texts and religious discourse, narrowing the scope for purely secular or contemporary themes.

Field interviews reflect this negotiation between autonomy and regulation. Teachers reported that while they could adapt instructional methods and differentiate tasks according to student abilities, they remained bound to core competencies set by the religious curriculum. This creates a hybrid model: *Merdeka Belajar* principles are applied in pedagogical approach – through project-based learning, peer collaboration, and differentiated assessment – but are less flexible in content selection. Consequently, the emphasis on relevance often means connecting language learning to students lived religious experiences, such as simulating dialogues around mosque activities or understanding Qur’anic commentary, rather than purely everyday conversational contexts.

In addition, the improvement in Arabic language understanding observed in the survey results can be attributed to the constructivist view that meaningful learning occurs when students actively engage and apply new knowledge in context. A competency-based curriculum, supported by the principles of *Merdeka Belajar*, provides students with clear learning objectives and opportunities for practical application, which facilitates deeper understanding and retention (Wardiyah et al., 2023). This approach not only makes learning more relevant but is also in line with the broader educational goal of cultivating lifelong learning skills by enabling students to learn at their own pace and in a way that is most effective for them (Sopian et al., 2025; Samsudi et al., 2024).

Small concerns expressed by a small percentage of students, such as feeling less motivated or finding the curriculum ineffective, underscore the importance of adaptation and ongoing support in a student-centered learning environment (Rokhimawan et al., 2023). According to the *Merdeka Belajar* theory, the success of such educational reforms depends on continuing to address diverse learning needs and ensuring that all students have access to the resources and support necessary for their success (Wardiyah et al., 2023; Samsudi et al., 2024). Therefore, despite the overall positive impact of the curriculum, this insight highlights the need for further refinement and individual support to fully realize the potential of the *Merdeka Belajar* principles in practice (Nur Hakim et al., 2024; Wasehudin et al., 2023).

The international impact of this research lies in its potential contribution to the broader discourse on Arabic language education in Muslim-majority countries and beyond (Abdullahi et al., 2023). As many countries seek to modernize and contextualize language teaching to meet 21st-century competencies, Indonesia's experience in implementing competency-based Arabic curriculum provides a valuable reference (Rufaiqoh et al., 2024). For example, the competency-based learning approach applied in Indonesian madrasahs, which integrates authentic assessments and collaborative activities, can be an adaptive model for countries such as Malaysia which also has a dual



education system (national and religious) (Munastiwi & Marfuah, 2019; Rekan et al., 2025), or Morocco and Tunisia which are reforming the Arabic language curriculum to make it more applicative (Allouche, 1989). On the other hand, the implementation challenges found in this study, such as the gap between theory and practice and teacher readiness, are also relevant for multilingual environments in countries such as France and the UK, where Arabic is taught as a heritage language to second generations of immigrants. This comparison opens up space for cross-border discussions on how constructivist approaches and CBLT can be adapted to local conditions, as well as how teacher training, education policies, and the role of religious institutions can contribute to strengthening Arabic language education globally.

Although this study demonstrates the overall positive impact of implementing a competency-based Arabic curriculum integrated with the principles of *Merdeka Belajar*, several limitations should be acknowledged. A small percentage of students reported negative experiences, such as decreased motivation, lack of enjoyment, or perceptions of ineffectiveness, but the underlying causes of these responses were not examined in depth. These issues may be related to mismatches between curriculum content and individual learning preferences, or to difficulties faced by students in adapting from traditional teacher-centered to student-centered approaches. In addition, teacher-related challenges—such as the transition to the role of facilitator, the need to manage diverse learning paces, and constraints related to limited resources—were identified but not comprehensively explored in this study. The reliance on self-reported survey data also introduces the potential for subjectivity and bias, while the focus on a limited number of institutions restricts the broader generalizability of the findings.

#### **D. Conclusion**

This study has shown that the implementation of a competency-based Arabic curriculum in Indonesian madrasahs significantly improved students' learning experiences, particularly in enhancing motivation, enjoyment, and comprehension. The synthesis of survey findings, teacher and principal

perspectives, and classroom observations demonstrates that the integration of structured competencies with the principles of *Merdeka Belajar* creates a more interactive, relevant, and student-centered learning environment. These results confirm that competency-based approaches, when contextualized within faith-based institutions, can effectively respond to diverse learner needs while promoting active participation and independent learning.

The primary contribution of this research lies in its development of an evidence-based curriculum model that explicitly integrates linguistic proficiency, cultural literacy, and real-world application into a competency-based framework. Theoretically, it strengthens constructivist and differentiation approaches in the context of Arabic language education, while practically, it provides a model that can guide policymakers, educators, and institutions in designing more adaptive and responsive curricula. The novelty of this study lies in bridging theory and practice, moving beyond descriptive analyses by demonstrating how competency-based learning can be operationalized in religious education to foster critical thinking, learner autonomy, and contextual relevance.

Nevertheless, several limitations must be acknowledged. The reliance on self-reported survey data presents the risk of subjective bias, and the focus on a limited number of institutions restricts the generalizability of findings. Future research should therefore expand to larger and more varied samples, employ mixed-methods designs, and integrate objective measures of language proficiency. Comparative cross-country studies would also enrich the discourse by examining how similar competency-based frameworks function in other Muslim-majority or multilingual contexts. Additionally, further investigation into the specific challenges faced by students who reported lower satisfaction, as well as the readiness and support structures for teachers, will be essential for refining the model and ensuring its broader applicability.

Finally, this study affirms that a competency-based Arabic curriculum aligned with *Merdeka Belajar* offers a transformative pathway for faith-based education, enabling it to move beyond rote memorization toward the



cultivation of higher-order thinking and lifelong learning skills. The key takeaway is that curriculum reform can only succeed when it not only structures competencies clearly but also provides flexibility for teachers and learners to adapt these competencies to real-life contexts. In doing so, this research contributes both to local educational innovation in Indonesia and to the global conversation on how competency-based learning can enrich language education in diverse cultural and religious settings.

### Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the Indonesia Endowment Fund for Education (LPDP) and Beasiswa Indonesia Bangkit - Kemenag for funding 7<sup>th</sup> author study and publication and for guiding and evaluating this publication.

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