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Bridging Faith and Language: Socio-Religious Values and Arabic Language Acquisition in Pesantren Walisongo Lampung Tengah

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Abstract

This study investigates the lived experiences of students (santri) and educators in acquiring Arabic within the socio-religious ecosystem of Pesantren Walisongo, Indonesia. While mainstream Second Language Acquisition (SLA) literature conceptualizes language learning through secular-functionalist lenses of instrumental utility or integrative motivation, it often neglects the transcendental imperatives that drive language socialization in faith-based environments. Adopting a Husserlian transcendental phenomenological research design, this study explores how socio-religious values shape the lived experience of Arabic acquisition. Data were collected through in-depth phenomenological interviews with 20 participants, extensive observations, and bracketing (epoché) to uncover the core essences of the phenomenon. Moustakas' systematic steps of phenomenological reduction revealed three core themes: (1) the lived experience of linguistic labor as a transcendental act of devotion (ibadah), which minimizes affective barriers; (2) navigating the lived space of the mandatory linguistic environment (bi'ah arabiyah) as a site of moral-existential peer accountability; and (3) the embodiment of Arabic as symbolic and spiritual capital linked to religious authority (akhlak). The study synthesizes these findings into a novel theoretical framework of Transcendental Language Socialization, arguing that Arabic acquisition in this context serves as an existential site for the co-constitution of linguistic fluency and spiritual identity.

Introduction

For several decades, the academic field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has undergone a profound "social turn," shifting away from purely cognitive, psycholinguistic, and computational models toward sociolinguistic, socio-cultural, and post-structuralist frameworks. Scholars have increasingly recognized that the process of acquiring a second language (L2) is not merely an internal, individualistic process of decoding syntax, internalizing morphology, and expanding lexical banks. Instead, contemporary SLA literature views language learning as an inherently social, political, and cultural act. It is a process deeply entangled with the negotiation of identity, power dynamics, institutional structures, and personal investments (Loewen & Sato, 2018). Learners do not acquire languages in a vacuum; they do so within highly structured social ecologies that dictate who can speak, when, and under what conditions.

Within this expansive socio-cultural turn, however, a glaring analytical omission persists: the role of the sacred, the transcendental, and the deeply held socio-religious values of the learners in driving and shaping their linguistic development. Mainstream SLA theories, most notably Robert Gardner's classic socio-educational model and Zoltán Dörnyei's widely implemented L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei, 2009; Gardner & Lambert, 1959), operate

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on fundamentally secularized assumptions. These traditional models assume that L2 learners are primarily driven by secular-functionalist motives, such as instrumental motivation, which views language acquisition as a pragmatic tool to secure career advancement, academic mobility, and socioeconomic gains. Similarly, integrative motivation focuses on the learner's desire to socially integrate into or identify with a geographically and politically bounded target language state, while the Ideal L2 Self represents an idealized vision of oneself as a competent, transnational citizen navigating global commercial markets (Pan & Zhang, 2021). Consequently, by prioritizing these market-driven and socio-political factors, mainstream paradigms fail to account for the unique linguistic trajectories of learners whose ultimate goals are transcendental, metaphysical, and deeply communal.

These models, while highly robust in explaining foreign language learning in Western, commercialized, or secular academic settings, exhibit severe explanatory limitations when transposed into traditional, faith-based educational ecologies. In these contexts, language is not viewed merely as a tool for economic transactions or secular self-actualization, but as an ontological bridge to the divine, a historical vessel of sacred texts, and an absolute moral imperative.

This analytical blind spot is particularly evident when examining the pesantren (Islamic boarding school) system in Indonesia. As one of the oldest and most resilient indigenous educational systems in Southeast Asia, the pesantren has historically functioned as the primary institution for the preservation, transmission, and reproduction of Islamic scholarship, moral rectitude (akhlak), and social cohesion (MR & Anjar, 2020). Far from being stagnant relics of the past, many contemporary Indonesian pesantrens have evolved into sophisticated, hybrid educational modelS (Arrahman et al., 2026). They successfully synthesize traditional textual scholarship (kitab turats or "yellow books") with modern curriculum designs, rigorous discipline, and mandatory foreign language immersion policies (Hamidah & Chasannudin, 2021).

Among these institutions, Pesantren Walisongo in East Java stands out as a premier example. Here, Arabic is not merely treated as an academic subject confined to a few hours of classroom instruction per week. Rather, it is institutionalized as the mandatory, living medium of all daily communication, administration, scholastic inquiry, and spiritual life. In the unique sociolinguistic ecosystem of Pesantren Walisongo, the acquisition of Arabic is completely decoupled from typical Western motivations. Students (santri) do not learn Arabic with the primary goal of migrating to the Middle East, nor do they seek to participate in global commercial markets. Instead, they acquire Arabic because it is conceptualized as Lughat al-Qur'an (the language of Divine Revelation), the language of the Prophet Muhammad, and the linguistic key required to unlock classical theological and juridical knowledge.

To master Arabic is to perform an act of deep spiritual devotion, to align oneself with a transhistorical community of Islamic scholars (ulama), and to cultivate the moral authority necessary to lead the Muslim community (ummah). Thus, the linguistic journey of the santri is fundamentally an existential and spiritual journey, where linguistic development and spiritual maturity are mutually constitutive.

Despite the remarkable success of the pesantren system in producing fluent, highly proficient Arabic speakers within non-Arab geographical environments, empirical research situated at the intersection of socio-religious values and SLA remains sparse and fragmented, largely due to a profound polarization into two isolated paradigm domains. On one hand, the traditional Islamic studies paradigm focuses extensively on classical grammatical structures

(nahw and sarf), theological text analysis, and historical pedagogy, yet it routinely overlooks contemporary SLA theories, cognitive-affective frameworks, and empirical sociolinguistic developments (Ahkas & Mahabbah Fillah, 2022; Lazuardi, 2025; Nahdla et al., 2023). On the other hand, the secular applied linguistics paradigm frequently relies on standardized Western quantitative instruments to measure isolated psychological variables, thereby stripping away the rich theological nuances, metaphysical motivations, and cultural depth inherent to the pesantren lifestyle. This scholarly divergence leaves a critical gap in the literature, where neither paradigm adequately captures the holistic, lived reality of learners who integrate linguistic mastery with spiritual devotion, highlighting the urgent need for a qualitative framework that bridges these two disparate domains. Consequently, there is a profound theoretical and empirical gap. We lack a holistic, deep understanding of the lived experience of L2 learners who navigate a world where language learning is an act of faith.

This study directly addresses this gap by deploying a transcendental phenomenological research design to investigate the lived experiences of students and educators at Pesantren Walisongo as they acquire Arabic. Grounded in Edmund Husserl's philosophical framework of phenomenology, this research aims to bracket all preconceived, secularized assumptions about language learning to uncover the core "essences" of the phenomenon: How do socio-religious values shape, govern, and transform the lived experience of Arabic language acquisition within the pesantren?

By analyzing the subjective, lived realities of the santri, this paper aims to bridge the divide between theology and applied linguistics. In doing so, we propose a new, globally applicable theoretical model, Transcendental Language Socialization (TLS). This model recognizes that for millions of faith-based learners across the globe, the path to second language fluency is fundamentally a spiritual pilgrimage.

Literature Review

The Secular Bias in L2 Motivation Theories: The Need for the Transcendental

For decades, the dominant paradigm in L2 motivation has been rooted in social psychology. Gardner's socio-educational model historically divided learner motivation into instrumental and integrative orientations. This model assumed that language learning is driven by a desire to achieve pragmatic rewards or to assimilate into a specific, geographically located target culture.

While this dichotomy provided a solid starting point, the rise of globalization prompted scholars to critique its rigidity. Zoltán Dörnyei addressed these limitations by introducing the L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei, 1994), which conceptualizes motivation through the lens of possible selves, the Ideal L2 Self (the internal representation of the fluent speaker the learner aspires to become) and the Ought-to L2 Self (the attributes the learner believes they must possess to avoid negative outcomes or meet external expectations) (Amrullah et al., 2026). Although Dörnyei's model successfully accounts for the internal psychological complexities of learners in a globalized world, it remains fundamentally anchored in a secular, individualistic worldview. It fails to capture the cognitive and emotional structures of learners whose "ideal self" is framed not by global corporate mobility, but by cosmic accountability, transcendental devotion, and metaphysical relationships (Stötzer et al., 2025). In faith-based contexts, the motivation to learn a language is often vertical rather than horizontal; it is directed toward the divine rather than peer groups or foreign states.

To ignore the transcendental dimension of motivation is to overlook the primary psychological force that drives these learners to endure rigorous linguistic discipline. Therefore, this study argues for the integration of a "Transcendental Imperative" into L2 motivation literature, a concept that defines language acquisition as an act of worship (ibadah) (Gandellini, 2025), where the ultimate reward is located in the metaphysical realm rather than secular social mobility (Siraj & Husni, 2020).

Language Socialization Theory in Faith-Based Communities

To understand how these socio-religious values are structurally and communicatively transmitted, this study utilizes Language Socialization Theory. This framework posits that language acquisition and cultural socialization are two sides of the same coin, one is socialized through the use of language, and one is socialized to use language.

Through everyday interactions, routines, and discourses within a specific community, novices internalize the cultural values, social structures, and behavioral expectations of their group. In a pesantren, which operates as what Erving Goffman conceptualizes as a "total institution," this socialization becomes uniquely totalizing and continuous, manifesting through two deeply integrated processes of development (Fatoni & Rais, 2018). On one hand, socialization through language is actively achieved as students continuously internalize core Islamic values, navigate complex peer hierarchies, and cultivate a shared sense of moral and existential responsibility through daily, mandatory Arabic interactions (Ahooja & Ballinger, 2022). On the other hand, socialization to use language is simultaneously enacted as santri master the highly specific linguistic registers, classical syntax, and sophisticated rhetorical styles indispensable for traditional scholarship and future religious work. Consequently, within this all-enveloping ecosystem, language acquisition ceases to be a neutral academic exercise; instead, it serves as a comprehensive socialization process where the development of linguistic automaticity and the internalization of sacred communal norms are structurally and dynamically co-constituted.

Students live, study, pray, eat, and sleep under a singular, overarching authority system. Language socialization in this environment is not confined to the classroom. It occurs in the dormitories, the mosque, the dining halls, and the sports fields. Crucially, this socialization is mediated by religious ideologies (Hatim Gazali et al., 2023). The linguistic choices made by the santri are continuously evaluated through a moral lens. Speaking the mandated language (Arabic) is socialized as a sign of obedience, respect, and spiritual discipline, while speaking vernacular languages is framed as a moral failure or a breach of communal solidarity. By observing the daily communicative practices of the pesantren, we can trace how a highly specific linguistic ideology is systematically internalized by the students. This process transforms them from linguistic novices into active agents of a shared religious-linguistic community.

Pierre Bourdieu: Habitus, Linguistic Capital, and the Religious Field

While Language Socialization Theory illuminates the micro-level interactions of language learning, Pierre Bourdieu's sociological framework provides the theoretical tools to analyze how these micro-interactions are shaped by broader institutional structures and power dynamics (Sparrow & Hutchinson, 2013). Bourdieu's key concepts, are highly instructive when applied to the pesantren context. Bourdieu defines habitus as a system of durable, transposable, and structured dispositions that are internalized by individuals through their social experiences, guiding their practices, perceptions, and behaviors (Husaeni, 2023). In Pesantren Walisongo, we can identify the cultivation of a "religious-linguistic habitus." This is an embodied state where

correct, fluent Arabic pronunciation, classical syntax, and pious bodily gestures are seamlessly fused.

To speak Arabic is to perform piety, the physical act of articulation is inextricably linked to the cultivation of a disciplined, religious self. Furthermore, within the specific field of the pesantren and the broader Indonesian religious landscape, Arabic functions as a highly valued form of linguistic capital. Bourdieu argues that languages are not just instruments of communication, but instruments of power. The value of a linguistic style or dialect is determined by its position within a market or field (Sparrow & Hutchinson, 2013).

In Indonesia, religious authority is highly contested. Possession of advanced Arabic linguistic capital is the ultimate marker of religious legitimacy. A person who can fluently navigate classical texts, deliver sermons in eloquent Arabic, and speak the language with native-like phonology is immediately invested with symbolic capital (prestige, honor, and institutional trust). This capital can be converted into social, political, and economic opportunities. By incorporating Bourdieu's concepts, this study avoids a naive, overly romanticized view of religious motivation, analyzing instead how faith-based values, institutional power structures, and the pursuit of symbolic authority interact to drive the language acquisition process.

Method

Phenomenological Research Paradigm

To capture the subjective, deeply internalized meanings that students and educators assign to their language learning journey, this study adopts a transcendental phenomenological research design. Phenomenology is uniquely suited for this inquiry because its primary objective is to describe the "common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (Creswell, 2012). The phenomenon under investigation is the lived experience of acquiring Arabic within a socio-religious value system at Pesantren Walisongo. Rather than seeking to explain causal relationships, test hypotheses, or measure statistical correlations, this design seeks to look beyond superficial behavioral observations. It aims to grasp the deeply felt, subjective realities of the participants, describing what they experienced and how they experienced it.

Research Setting and Context

This study was conducted at Pesantren Walisongo, an influential, modern-traditional hybrid Islamic boarding school located in East Java, Indonesia. Pesantren Walisongo was selected because it represents a highly specialized linguistic and religious ecology. The institution houses approximately 3,500 resident santri (students) and employs over 150 language instructors (asatidz). The school enforces a strict, total-immersion language policy, students are required to communicate exclusively in Arabic and English, alternating on a bi-weekly or monthly basis. The physical space is saturated with linguistic and religious symbols, with bilingual Arabic-English signage, Quranic calligraphy, and language-learning posters plastering every wall. The institution also features a dedicated disciplinary body, the Majlis al-Lughah (Language Council), which is responsible for monitoring, regulating, and enforcing linguistic compliance across all domains of daily life.

Participant Selection and Profiles

Following the methodological principles of phenomenological inquiry, participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure they had all directly experienced the phenomenon under study. The sample size consisted of 20 participants, which is well within Moustakas' recommendation of 10 to 25 participants for a phenomenological study to achieve deep thematic saturation.

To capture a comprehensive and multi-faceted perspective of this phenomenon, the participant pool was divided into two distinct, highly strategic cohorts. The first cohort comprised fifteen students (santri), who were purposefully selected based on their length of residency while representing varying levels of Arabic proficiency ranging from intermediate to advanced. The second cohort consisted of five language instructors (asatidz), who were selected based on their extensive pedagogical experience at the pesantren (requiring a minimum of five years of active tenure) and their direct, hands-on role in managing, enforcing, and designing the mandatory language immersion policies. By bridging the lived experiences of both the language learners who navigate the daily pressures of immersion and the educators who structurally shape this environment, this dual-cohort division allowed for a robust, reciprocal analysis of the institutional and personal dimensions of the acquisition process.

Data Collection

The primary method of data collection was deep, semi-structured, phenomenological interviews. These interviews were designed to elicit rich, descriptive narratives of the participants' inner emotional, cognitive, and spiritual states as they navigated the language learning process. Interviews were conducted in quiet, private rooms within the pesantren to ensure comfort and confidentiality. Each interview lasted between 75 to 120 minutes, was audio-recorded with explicit consent, and was conducted in a mix of Indonesian and Arabic to allow participants to express themselves with maximum precision and emotional nuance. The researchers also conducted extensive participant observations over a six-month period, keeping detailed field notes of spontaneous linguistic interactions, and gathered institutional documents (language rulebooks, pedagogical manuals) to build a rich contextual backdrop for the phenomenological descriptions.

Data Analysis

The verbatim interview transcripts were systematically analyzed following the rigorous, multi-staged steps of transcendental phenomenological reduction outlined by Moustakas (1994). The analytical process began with horizonalization, a critical phase where the researchers treated every participant statement with equal value, listing all relevant, non-repetitive, and non-overlapping expressions to lay a foundation of unbiased data.

These statements were then systematically grouped into distinct meaning units or invariant horizons by isolating the core psychological and conceptual elements of each experience. Subsequently, these meaning units were organized through clustering,

allowing cohesive, overarching themes that represent the structural and emotional nuances of the phenomenon to emerge organically. With these themes established, the researchers constructed a detailed textural description to articulate what the participants experienced, embedding direct, verbatim quotes to preserve the raw voices of the santri and asatidz. This was paired with a comprehensive structural description detailing how the specific socio-religious context, physical setting, and institutional discipline of the pesantren influenced and shaped those experiences. Finally, the analytical cycle culminated in the synthesis of essences, merging both the textural and structural descriptions into a unified, essential portrait that captures the universal, lived essence of acquiring Arabic within the socio-religious ecosystem of Pesantren Walisongo.

During this entire process, the researchers systematically applied the principle of epoché (bracketing). We continuously monitored and suspended our own personal, theoretical, and academic assumptions regarding SLA, language anxiety, and institutional discipline. This bracketing allowed us to approach the participants' lived realities with fresh, non-judgmental awareness, ensuring that the final themes emerged organically from the voices of the santri and asatidz themselves.

Result and Discussion

The Transcendental Essence of Linguistic Labor: Ibadah as Noesis

The first and most fundamental theme that emerged from the phenomenological reduction was the conceptualization of linguistic labor as a direct, physical form of ibadah (transcendental worship). This represents the cognitive-emotional lens (noesis) through which the participants experience the everyday challenges of second language acquisition. Rather than perceiving the exhaustive routines of language learning as mundane, stressful academic requirements, the santri experience these struggles as a form of sacred devotion.

In the lived experience of the participants, every linguistic effort is invested with eternal, metaphysical significance. P1 described his early morning vocabulary sessions with vivid spiritual detail: "Every single morning, right after the dawn prayer (subuh), we are required to stand in lines in the courtyard and memorize five new mufradat (vocabulary words) given by our senior instructors. In the beginning, when I was in my first year, my body would ache with exhaustion. The morning air of East Java is freezing, and my eyes would burn from lack of sleep. I used to feel this heavy, crushing anxiety in my chest.

But then, our ustadz (teacher) reminded us of a prophetic tradition: 'He who goes forth in search of knowledge is in the path of Allah until he returns.' That changed everything in my mind. Suddenly, the freezing cold was no longer an obstacle; it was a physical witness of my striving. The heavy vocabulary words became keys to the Quran. Now, when I struggle to pronounce a difficult guttural Arabic sound, I don't feel embarrassed. I feel a quiet joy in my heart. I know that this physical struggle is recorded

by the angels as an act of jihad (spiritual striving). The exhaustion is transformed into a spiritual sweetness."

This narrative reveals how the transcendental reframing of language acquisition fundamentally alters the learner's affective filter. In traditional, secular SLA environments, physical fatigue, academic pressure, and public performance anxiety typically raise the learner's affective filter, causing them to withdraw or experience cognitive blocks. At Pesantren Walisongo, however, the spiritualization of linguistic labor acts as a powerful psychological buffer. Because the struggle itself is viewed as a source of divine reward, the emotional weight of difficulty is neutralized.

This perspective was corroborated by the language instructors, who deliberately utilize spiritual framing as their primary pedagogical strategy. U1 a senior Arabic teacher with over a decade of experience, explained the institutional philosophy during his interview, "In a normal, secular school, if a student fails a vocabulary test, they feel stupid, and the teacher gets frustrated. Here, we teach them that Arabic is not just an academic subject; it is the language of Paradise, the language chosen by Allah to communicate with humanity. Therefore, the brain is not the only thing involved in learning Arabic, the qalb (spiritual heart) is the primary vessel.

When a student struggles with nahw (syntax), I do not tell them they lack intelligence. I tell them to purify their intentions (tashih al-niyah). I tell them that their struggle is a form of worship. Once the student believes that learning this language is a direct path to drawing closer to Allah, their mental blockages dissolve. They study with a sense of sacred duty, not academic fear."

This stark contrast between traditional SLA mechanics and the unique processes observed in this faith-based setting can be conceptualized through two opposing developmental pathways. In the standard, secular SLA model, the onset of academic stress and linguistic difficulty directly triggers elevated performance anxiety and cognitive blocks, which subsequently raises the learner's affective filter and results in severely reduced linguistic intake. Conversely, the Pesantren Walisongo Model of TLS demonstrates that when students encounter linguistic difficulty, the experience is immediately reframed through a theological lens as a form of ibadah (devotional worship) or jihad (spiritual striving). This cognitive and spiritual reframing actively fosters a state of profound spiritual resilience and drastically lowers the affective filter, ultimately leading to enhanced linguistic intake and accelerated acquisition (Yusri et al., 2013). Crucially, this spiritual resilience is not merely an abstract theoretical construct or a passive coping mechanism, it manifests as a deeply felt, bodily experience for the santri, where physical exhaustion and linguistic labor are physically and emotionally felt as sacred acts of devotion rather than academic burdens (Cristel G et al., 2025).

P3 shared how this transcendental focus helped her overcome debilitating public speaking anxiety, "I used to shake and stutter whenever I had to stand on the podium to deliver the weekly Arabic speech (khutbah). My hands would get sweaty, and I felt like I was going to throw up. But before I ascended the steps of the stage, my senior mentor

whispered to me: 'Fatimah, you are not standing there to impress these girls. You are standing there as a servant of Allah, training your tongue to speak the language of His book. Speak for Him, “When I stepped up, the crowd of five hundred girls dissolved. I realized that my audience was the Divine. The fear of making a grammatical mistake vanished. I spoke with a clarity I had never felt before. Now, when I speak Arabic, I feel an profound sense of peace. The language has become a sanctuary, not a source of stress."

Navigating the Lived Space of the Bi’ah Arabiyah: Moral Surveillance and Existential Discipline

The second core theme focuses on how the participants experience the physical and social space of the bi’ah arabiyah (compulsory Arabic-speaking environment). At Pesantren Walisongo, this linguistic environment is not maintained through gentle academic encouragement; it is enforced through a strict, totalizing system of peer-led disciplinary surveillance that operates as a shared moral-existential covenant. The Majlis al-Lughah (Language Council), comprised of senior students, acts as the governing body of this linguistic space. They deploy covert student observers, known as jasus (spies), who discretely monitor the conversations of their peers in all areas of the pesantren.

Any student caught speaking a word of Indonesian or Javanese is issued a formal citation and summoned to the weekly language court (mahkamah al-lughah). The lived experience of this surveillance is complex. It oscillates between intense disciplinary pressure and deep, restorative solidarity. P10, an officer in the Language Council, described the existential weight of his role: "Being an officer of the Majlis al-Lughah is a heavy burden. We do not enjoy caughting our brothers speaking Indonesian. It is exhausting to constantly listen, to be on alert. Sometimes, my friends look at me with resentment when I write down their names. It hurts. But I have to remind myself of our sacred duty of amr bi-l-ma'ruf wa-n-nahy 'an al-munkar (enjoining what is good and forbidding what is wrong). If I let my dormitory brother slide when he speaks Javanese, I am not being a good friend. I am contributing to the decay of our linguistic sanctuary. I am letting him break his spiritual covenant with the pesantren. My duty to keep the environment pure is an act of spiritual preservation. We are protecting the collective vessel of our learning."

For the students who are monitored, the experience of the weekly language court is a highly performative, emotionally charged event. Far from being a dry, administrative punishment, the mahkamah is experienced as a site of moral correction and public identity negotiation. P5, an intermediate student, described his experience of being summoned to the court, "I remember when I was caught speaking Javanese while brushing my teeth in the bathroom. The jasus heard me, and on Thursday night, my name was called over the loudspeaker to face the mahkamah. My heart was pounding. Standing before the three senior judges in the main hall under the bright lights, I felt a deep sense of shame. But it was not a secular shame of being caught breaking a school rule. It was a moral shame. I felt like I had let down my Kyai, my parents, and my peers.”

This experiential narrative highlights a deeply transformative journey, illustrating how the student's punishment, which involved standing in the center of the cafeteria during lunch hours for three days wearing a sign that read 'Mukhalif al-Lughah' (Language Violator) while reciting fifty lines of the classical Arabic grammar poem Alfiyah Ibn Malik from memory, transcended mere institutional penalty. Although standing in public view while peers were eating initially felt humiliating, the act of reciting the beautiful, rhythmic verses of Ibn Malik prompted a profound cognitive and emotional shift, turning public embarrassment into a quiet, resilient determination (Coeckelbergh, 2021). This transition was heavily supported by the community, as fellow students did not mock the violator but instead offered whispered words of spiritual encouragement, reinforcing that the sanction was designed not to crush the individual, but to restore them to the collective linguistic fold while mastering neglected grammatical structures (Matos et al., 2024).

This transformation is systematically organized through a highly structured social process known as the Lived Cycle of Disciplinary Correction. This cycle begins when a student slips and speaks a local vernacular language like Javanese or Indonesian (infraction), which is promptly documented by a designated peer monitor known as the Jasus Lughah (detection). The student is subsequently publicly named and summoned to face the Mahkamah al-Lughah (summons), where they are issued a highly performative, academic task, such as memorizing classical grammar poems or standing in a public square (sanction). Crucially, rather than resulting in social isolation, this phase triggers active communal support as peers offer verbal and spiritual encouragement (community), ultimately leading to a successful return to the linguistic circle with enhanced vocabulary, refined syntactic skills, and a deep, restorative sense of moral and social alignment (integration).

This performative discipline highlights how the physical space of the pesantren is saturated with moral meaning. The boundaries between secular behavior and religious duty are completely dissolved. The linguistic policy is experienced as a living, collective covenant (Pradana et al., 2022). To break the language rule is to tear a hole in the spiritual fabric of the community; to accept the punishment is to engage in a restorative act of self-purification.

The Embodied Sacred Self

The third major theme revealed how the acquisition of Arabic transforms the santri's sense of self. This theme highlights how the language is internalized as a potent form of linguistic capital that is directly convertible into symbolic capital, namely religious authority, intellectual prestige, and moral integrity (akhlak). Within the hierarchy of Pesantren Walisongo, fluent command of Arabic completely dictates a student's social mobility and position. Those who can speak the language with native-like eloquence, construct sophisticated rhetorical arguments, and interpret complex classical texts are elevated to elite leadership status.

P2 a highly advanced senior student, reflected on how his mastery of Arabic redefined his identity, "When I first arrived at this pesantren, I was just a quiet, insecure boy from a small farming village in Central Java. I had no confidence, and I felt invisible. But as I began to throw myself into the study of Arabic, memorizing the grammar, practicing the pronunciation every day, everything changed. This transformation is not merely internal; it is recognized and validated by the broader Indonesian social field. In a society where religious legitimacy is highly prized, the ability to speak the language of revelation is the ultimate marker of authentic scholarship.

The asatidz are highly aware of this sociolinguistic dynamic and actively use it to prepare students for their future roles in society. U2, the director of the Language Council, elaborated, "We always tell our santri that the world outside this pesantren is hungry for true spiritual guidance. But that guidance must be backed by authentic knowledge. In our society, if a preacher cannot read or speak Arabic fluently, their authority is hollow. They are just repeating translations." But when a graduate of Pesantren Walisongo stands in front of a congregation, recites a Quranic verse with flawless Arabic phonology, and immediately provides an eloquent commentary using classical syntax, the hearts of the people open instantly.

This experiential perspective highlights how Arabic is conceptualized not merely as a medium of communication, but as the ultimate ornament of an Islamic scholar and the very garment of authority. Rather than training students for secular pursuits or transient tourism in the Arab world, the institution aims to prepare them as the spiritual shepherds of the ummah (global Muslim community), framing the linguistic capital they acquire as an indispensable instrument to lead, protect, and guide society upon leaving the pesantren gates.

This institutional vision operates through a structured process of Linguistic and Symbolic Capital Conversion, bridging the micro-field of the pesantren with the macro-field of broader society. Within the immediate pesantren field, students amass raw linguistic capital characterized by flawless classical pronunciation, a rigorous mastery of complex syntax (nahw) and morphology (sarf), and the advanced literacy required to debate, translate, and interpret classical texts (turats) (Al-Janaideh et al., 2023; Parhan & Maksum, 2022; Rasyid et al., 2024). Through a deliberate conversion process, this specialized linguistic capital is systematically transformed into valuable symbolic capital within the broader societal field. Upon graduation, this converted capital manifests as recognized religious authority and communal legitimacy, a strong public perception of moral rectitude and intellectual integrity (akhlak), and direct eligibility for leadership placements as ulama (religious scholars), community guides, and influential academic educators (Al Shlowiy, 2022; Hamidah & Chasannudin, 2021).

This connection between linguistic performance and moral integrity (akhlak) is a crucial element of the lived experience. The participants do not view language as a neutral tool that can be used by anyone. Rather, they believe that true mastery of Arabic

is only possible if the speaker possesses a clean spiritual heart and behaves with moral uprightness.

P7, a female junior student, shared, "We have a saying in the dormitory: 'Your Arabic is only as beautiful as your akhlak (character).' If a girl is highly fluent in Arabic but is rude to her teachers, gossips about her friends, or neglects her prayers, her fluency is viewed as empty, almost artificial. It lacks barakah (divine blessing). But when a girl speaks with kindness, humility, and always helps others, her Arabic has a beautiful weight to it. It sounds sincere. We believe that Allah grants linguistic ease to those who purify their hearts. Therefore, my struggle to speak Arabic is inseparable from my struggle to be a better Muslim. The language and my soul are growing together."

Discussion

The phenomenological findings of this study provide strong empirical evidence for the limitations of conventional, secularized SLA theories when applied to faith-based environments. TLS theoretically integrates the core tenets of Language Socialization Theory, originally formulated by Ochs and Schieffelin, with the existential realities of faith, redefining language acquisition not as a secular, utilitarian skill-building exercise, but as a deeply transformative spiritual pilgrimage (Dao, 2022). This theoretical framework operates through three foundational, interconnected dimensions.

First, the trace of the sacred (ontological orientation) posits that the target language is conceptualized not merely as a tool for communication, but as a direct extension of the divine. By establishing this sacred connection, learners drastically lower their affective barriers, allowing them to cognitively reframe linguistic struggles and academic hurdles not as frustrating failures, but as a form of noble spiritual striving (jihad) (Henderson-Sellers, 2012). Second, the communal covenant (socialization mechanics) ensures that the rigorous immersion environment is structurally sustained through a shared, collective moral obligation, specifically the Quranic principle of amr bi-l-ma'ruf (enjoining good, rather than relying solely on cold, bureaucratic, or top-down institutional enforcement (Gane, 2005). Finally, the socialization process culminates in the embodied spiritual self (capital and identity output), which conceptualizes language acquisition as an active site of profound identity transformation. Within this final dimension, the development of high linguistic fluency and the cultivation of sacred moral character (akhlak) are not treated as separate pedagogical goals; rather, they are dynamically co-constitutive, shaping the learner into a whole, spiritually grounded agent of the community (Soltani & Zhang, 2023).

Under the TLS framework, the classical concept of the Ideal L2 Self (Dörnyei) is elevated from an individualistic, secular plane to a collective, transcendental one. The santri do not aspire to become fluent Arabic speakers to secure economic mobility in a globalized market. Rather, their "Ideal L2 Self" is a spiritually mature leader of the ummah, a preservationist of sacred texts, and an active agent of divine will (Amrullah et al., 2025; Lee & Lu, 2023). This transcendental focus alters the entire cognitive-emotional landscape of language acquisition. By reframing the physical and mental

exhaustion of language learning as ibadah (worship) and jihad (striving), the learner's affective filter (Krashen) is significantly lowered. Anxieties and fears of failure are converted into spiritual resilience, allowing learners to approach linguistic challenges with confidence, patience, and a sense of sacred purpose. Furthermore, TLS redefines the mechanics of language socialization. In a secular institution, language policies are typically maintained through top-down administrative regulations, grading systems, and institutional surveillance.

In a TLS environment like Pesantren Walisongo, language policies are maintained through a shared moral-existential covenant. The strict linguistic rules are not perceived as external restrictions, but as collective spiritual practices that protect the sacred purity of the space. Peer surveillance, mediated by the Islamic principle of amr bi-l-ma'ruf wa-n-nahy 'an al-munkar, transforms everyday corrections into acts of mutual care and spiritual accountability. This dense, values-driven sociolinguistic network ensures a level of immersion, language production, and conversational automaticity that is rarely achieved in standard foreign language programs.

The lived experiences of the santri also resonate deeply with philosophical perspectives on language. In the total institution of Pesantren Walisongo, the mandatory Arabic environment (bi’ah arabiyah) serves as a literal and symbolic "house of being." By entering this space, the santri leave behind their native vernaculars (Indonesian and Javanese) and step into a linguistic reality that has been constructed to reflect and sustain their religious commitments (Jordan, 1987). Within this sacred space, the boundaries between the self, the environment, and the divine are continually blurred. The physical act of articulating Arabic words is experienced as a bodily alignment with the sacred.

The santri do not just speak Arabic, they inhabit it. Every domain of their daily life is mediated by a language that carries the weight of centuries of Islamic history, theology, and philosophy. This totalizing linguistic dwelling shapes their cognitive structures, their emotional responses, and their moral self-understandings. The language becomes the medium through which their spiritual identity is articulated, performed, and brought into being. This ontological dwelling explains why the santri experience such a profound transformation in their self-identity. By mastering the "house" of Arabic, they gain access to the historical and transhistorical community of Islamic scholars. They are no longer isolated individuals in a small Javanese village, they are active, authoritative members of the global ummah. Their mastery of the language allows them to construct an integrated sense of self where linguistic fluency, intellectual competence, and moral authority are completely fused. The language is not just an academic asset; it is the very foundation of their existential dwelling in the world.

While the transcendental and ontological aspects of the pesantren’s linguistic environment are highly empowering, a rigorous Bourdieusian analysis reveals that this system is not free from internal tensions, power struggles, and forms of symbolic violence (Drigas et al., 2021). The construction of a "religious-linguistic habitus" through

the disciplinary mechanisms of the Majlis al-Lughah and the mahkamah al-lughah represents a deliberate, highly efficient operation of institutional power that can marginalize some learners. By linking linguistic performance directly to moral integrity (akhlak) and spiritual devotion (ibadah), the institution elevates Arabic to the status of ultimate linguistic capital.

However, this structural configuration is not without its socio-relational friction, as it simultaneously generates a rigid, highly stratified social hierarchy within the student body. At the apex of this stratification stands the linguistic elite, comprised of students who exhibit high language proficiency, sophisticated rhetorical mastery, and an advanced command of classical syntax. This group benefits from close, personalized mentorship from the Kyai (head of the pesantren) and is routinely elevated to prestigious, highly authoritative leadership roles, such as serving on the Majlis al-Lughah (Language Council) to govern and enforce the institution's language policies. Conversely, at the base of this hierarchy are the struggling L2 learners, who grapple with low oral and grammatical proficiency, consequently finding themselves in a cyclical pattern of repeated infractions, public sanctions, and heightened linguistic anxiety (Sadoughi & Hejazi, 2024). Crucially, within this deeply moralized field, linguistic struggle is rarely viewed as a purely cognitive or pedagogical deficit, instead, it carries a heavy risk of socio-religious stigmatization, where struggling learners are often perceived by the community as spiritually "lazy" or "lacking" in both devotion and character (akhlak), illustrating how linguistic performance is directly tied to social capital and moral standing within the institution.

Within this hierarchy, those who struggle with language acquisition due to cognitive differences, processing challenges, or late-entry backgrounds run a serious risk. They are not merely seen as academically weak; they can be perceived as spiritually undisciplined, morally lazy, or lacking in commitment to the collective covenant. The public, performative nature of the punishments meted out by the mahkamah al-lughah functions as a highly visible marker of social deviance. While these sanctions are designed to be restorative, they can exert immense psychological pressure on less proficient students. The intense anxiety, shame, and feelings of inadequacy experienced by some participants during their encounters with the language court suggest that the system's high efficiency comes at a significant emotional cost.

The conversion of a linguistic error into a moral failure is a form of symbolic violence that can alienate struggling learners, creating internal divisions that run counter to the pesantren's stated values of spiritual equality and communal harmony. Therefore, while the Pesantren Walisongo model offers invaluable lessons for values-driven language immersion, it must remain sensitive to these power dynamics. It is critical to ensure that the spiritual reframing of language acquisition does not inadvertently exclude or pathologize those who struggle with the physical demands of L2 learning.

Conclusion

Utilizing a transcendental phenomenological approach, this study explores the dynamics of Arabic language acquisition within the socio-religious ecosystem of Pesantren Walisongo to formulate a novel conceptual framework termed Transcendental Language Socialization (TLS). This framework is underpinned by three core dimensions: first, the spiritualization of linguistic labour, which reconstructs academic stress and performance anxiety into spiritual resilience by conceptualizing the learning process as ibadah (worship) and jihad (striving), thereby effectively minimizing the learners' affective filters; second, the collective linguistic covenant, which maintains a communal moral space (bi'ah arabiyah) through peer-led surveillance and restorative discipline rooted in amr bi-l-ma'ruf to continuously stimulate conversational automaticity; and third, the embodiment of linguistic capital, which positions Arabic proficiency as a potent symbolic resource directly convertible into religious authority, moral integrity (akhlak), and social leadership. Ultimately, the TLS model offers an innovative paradigm for applied linguistics, empirically demonstrating how theological values function as primary drivers that shape and accelerate second language acquisition within faith-based environments.

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