

BEYOND RELIGIOUS MOTIVATION: SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDENTS' ARABIC LEARNING EXPERIENCES IN BRUNEI DARUSSALAM

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the motivation of international students from Asia in choosing Brunei Darussalam as a destination for learning Arabic. This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design. Informants in this study include students from Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines who are enrolled in Arabic language programs at Sultan Sharif Ali Islamic University. The results show that Southeast Asian students choose Brunei for its high-quality education, conducive multicultural environment, socio-political stability, and strong Islamic influence. Despite the gap between initial expectations (such as educational modernisation and Western cultural influence) and the reality on the ground, most students were able to adapt and achieve their learning goals. This is supported by various effective strategies, such as joining study groups, interacting with native speakers, using digital resources, and participating in Arabic extracurricular activities. These strategies not only improve linguistic competence but also strengthen motivation and confidence. These results confirm that the combination of factors that encourage interest, local adaptation, and appropriate learning strategies makes Brunei an attractive and practical destination for Arabic language learning, while also contributing to the development of Arabic language education policy in ASEAN.

Keywords: *motivation, learning goals, learning strategies, international students, Arabic*

INTRODUCTION

Brunei Darussalam is an interesting destination for international students who want to learn Arabic. This is noteworthy considering that Brunei is not an Arab country. In 2018, Brunei hosted more than 3,000 international students from various countries, mainly-Indonesia, Malaysia, the southern Philippines, and other ASEAN countries, with around 1,200 from Indonesia (Mahani Hamdan et al., 2020). Meanwhile, in 2020, around 2,000 students, both local and international, were learning Arabic in Brunei. This figure reflects the high level of interest in Arabic despite Brunei having a more diverse cultural background than other Arab countries (Tibok et al., 2019). This reflects Brunei's commitment to promoting multilingual education and cross-cultural cooperation (Phan Le Ha, 2023). Arabic language programs not only improve language skills but also strengthen cultural understanding between Brunei, the Arab world, and the global community, in line with the country's efforts to strengthen the role of education as a means of international collaboration grounded in moderate Islamic values.

Brunei's success in teaching Arabic as the primary language. This uniqueness attracted the attention of researchers, as seen in Bakar's (2024) work, which discussed the challenges of teaching Islamic Studies without mastery of Arabic, and Rosyad et al (2025), who examined student orientation in learning Arabic. Yan (2023) adds perspective by placing Arabic within the framework of comparative studies, while Ridha et al. (2023) provide a bibliometric analysis of research trends in Arabic language teaching in non-Arabic-speaking countries. Razem & Pandor (2023) also discuss various methodological obstacles in teaching Arabic for foreign speakers. From the different tendencies of this study, it is evident that the focus on local contexts and teaching challenges is dominant. However, studies specifically examining Arabic language instruction for international students in Brunei Darussalam remain very limited. In fact, Brunei has positioned itself as a centre for Arabic-language teaching in Southeast Asia, with a unique and effective practical approach. Understanding the motivations of can provide important insights for other non-Arab countries, especially Muslim-majority ones, to replicate or adapt teaching strategies to improve the quality of Arabic language learning in an increasingly competitive global context.

Building on the growing interest of among Asian students in learning Arabic in Brunei Darussalam, this study aims to analyse their motivation, in choosing the country as a study destination, in-for the context of Brunei, which-is known as a country with a strong Islamic identity and the role of the Arabic language as an integral part of the education system and social life. This research will answer three main questions: first, why are Asian students interested in studying Arabic

in Brunei Darussalam, and how does this affect their decision to choose a study destination? Second, how well do the goals students set align with the actual conditions for learning Arabic in Brunei? Third, what strategies do Asian students use to achieve their goals while studying Arabic in Brunei? This research will use a qualitative approach and involve in-depth interviews with foreign students currently studying Arabic or who have studied Arabic at Bruneian higher education institutions. The results of the study are expected to provide a deeper understanding of the dynamics of motivation, expectations, and experiences of Arabic language learning in Brunei, as well as recommendations for improving international education policies in the country.

THEORETICAL STUDIES

Operationally, motivation refers to the psychological forces (intrinsic or extrinsic) that impel an individual to begin, sustain and direct behaviours toward a purpose. In the learning domain, motivation is displayed as engagement, persistence, and affective reactions to challenges or failures. Moreover, intrinsic (e.g., interest, curiosity or personal satisfaction) aspects differ from extrinsic aspects, which include rewards, school grades, and social pressure (Latham & Pinder, 2005). As in the case of other language learning situations, in contextualising the motivation dimension to Arabic language studies it is also worth highlighting that one's motivation dictates how much he/she is ready to face or accept the level of intricacies involved (e.g., morphological structure/transformation, i'rab system, lexical items with differing form from one's L1) and boldly doing so (Kanfer, 1990).

The motivation of Asian international students to learn Arabic in Brunei Darussalam is a complex phenomenon influenced by the interactions among religious, cultural, educational, and policy factors. Most students from countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, the Southern Philippines, and India come to Brunei with strong religious backgrounds, where Islam is not only a faith, but also an integral part of social and cultural identity. Research by Gardner (2020) in the Socio-Educational Model of Second Language Acquisition shows that the motivation of foreign language learners can be instrumental, such as for career or graduation purposes, or integrative, i.e, the drive to connect with the native-speaking community. In this context, many Asian students are religiously motivated to understand the Qur'an and Islamic scientific traditions firsthand, making Arabic a spiritual as well as an academic tool. Brunei Darussalam, with its Malay Islamic Monarchy ideology, offers an environment consistent with these values. Educational institutions such as the University of Brunei Darussalam (UBD) and various tahfiz centres and madrassas provide an ecosystem that

supports Arabic language learning in the context of authentic Islam, in line with the findings that early social and cultural experiences influence motivation when learning a foreign language and self-perception of language skills. Research by Wang et al (2020) also supports that sociocultural backgrounds can influence motivation and self-perception in language learning, thereby increasing its attractiveness to international learners.

These motivational dynamics are further clarified through the development of modern theories of language learning, especially the L2 Motivational Self System, which emphasises the role of future self-image in encouraging learning efforts. Students often imagine themselves as scholars, religious teachers, Qur'anic translators, or professionals who can contribute to the global Muslim world—an ideal image of the self (the L2 self) that is a powerful driver (Takahashi & Im, 2020; Lamb, 2012). On the other hand, external pressures, such as family or local community expectations (ought-to L2 self), also shape their commitment (Rostami et al., 2015). The findings of the study by Yan (2023) show that Southeast Asian students tend to have a high level of intrinsic motivation due to the support of their religious environment (Yan, 2023). However, motivation is not always stable; it can develop or decrease depending on real experience in the field (Fatima et al., 2022; Khajavy et al., 2019). In Brunei, although access to education and scholarships such as the Brunei Darussalam Government Scholarship (BDGS) are initial incentives, long-term motivation is highly dependent on the extent to which students feel socially and linguistically involved in their daily lives (Kormos & Csizér, 2013; Falout, 2013).

Brunei's geographical and sociolinguistic context provides a unique feel compared to those of Middle Eastern countries, which are usually the destinations for Arabic language learners. Brunei offers a blend of Islamic authenticity and cultural proximity to Southeast Asian Malay countries, thereby reducing the cultural gap that often makes adaptation difficult. According to Ahnagari and Zamanian (2014), language learning requires the development of intercultural communication competencies, in which local and cultural contexts are integral to the learning process (Saharani, 2023). This creates a sense of familiarity and relevance, increasing students' emotional engagement. However, challenges remain: although Arabic is formally taught, its use in daily life is limited. The majority of Bruneians speak either Malay or English, so international students rarely have a natural opportunity to practice speaking. This condition can weaken motivation if additional programs, such as language exchange or mentorship by native speakers, do not support it.

The main theoretical frameworks are the L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which are used to understand

motivation holistically. L2MSS helps explain how future vision influences learning decisions, while SDT distinguishes between actions driven by intrinsic interest and those driven by external pressure (Chen, 2022). In Brunei, many students begin learning with extrinsic motivation, but can develop intrinsic motivation when they feel competent and socially connected (Cao et al., 2023). Sarwari et al. (2024) show that when language learning is linked to spiritual and personal meaning, motivation becomes more sustainable. Achieving the objectives of this study can serve as a basis for more inclusive and sustainable language education policies in the face of differences in religious and cultural understanding (Chung & Long, 2024).

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative methodology grounded in a case study framework. The choice of this design stems from its ability to support a nuanced, context-specific investigation of real-life phenomena (Schellekens et al., 2024). Data were primarily gathered through focus group discussions (FGDs), a method selected for its ability to elicit dynamic, layered insights shaped by collective dialogue. FGDs offer a space where participants' shared meanings, interpersonal interactions, and affective dimensions can surface more vividly than through individual accounts alone (Alaslan, 2022, 2024; Robbani, 2022; Iryana, 2019). Furthermore, group interactions often uncover subtle viewpoints that might remain concealed in one-on-one interviews (Firman, 2018; Syahrin et al., 2023), thereby deepening the researcher's understanding of the participants' lived motivations and personal journeys (Hasani et al., 2022; Moha & Sudrajat, 2019).

All discussions were conducted in English and facilitated using a semi-structured guide. The moderator began with open-ended prompts—such as, “What first drew you to study Arabic in Brunei Darussalam?”—and followed up with targeted probes such as, “Could you recall a specific experience when your motivation was either seriously tested or significantly strengthened?” While the conversation remained anchored to the core themes of teacher education aspirations and Arabic language learning, room was intentionally for organic exchanges and peer elaboration. With prior informed consent, each session was audio-recorded, and moderators also noted nonverbal behaviours to support richer contextual analysis.

The participant pool included twelve third-year undergraduates from the Arabic Language Studies Program at Universiti Islam Sultan Sharif Ali (UNISSA). Selection criteria emphasised both linguistic competence in Arabic and academic readiness (Saunders, 2012). The group was evenly distributed: four students each

from Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia—reflecting a deliberate effort to incorporate diverse cultural and educational perspectives, in alignment with qualitative sampling principles that prioritise meaningful variation and relevance (Hoepfl, 1997).

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Number	Initials	Country of Origin	Where to Study	Age
1	I1	Indonesia	UNISSA	24
2	I2	Indonesia	UNISSA	23
3	I3	Indonesia	UNISSA	24
4	I4	Indonesia	UNISSA	21
5	F1	Philippines	UNISSA	25
6	F2	Philippines	UNISSA	27
7	F3	Philippines	UNISSA	26
8	F4	Philippines	UNISSA	23
9	M1	Malaysia	UNISSA	25
10	M2	Malaysia	UNISSA	26
11	M3	Malaysia	UNISSA	23
12	M4	Malaysia	UNISSA	22

Three in-person focus group sessions were conducted, each involving four participants originating from the same country, with discussion durations ranging from 40 to 56 minutes. To strengthen data trustworthiness, triangulation across multiple sources and member checking were employed. The recorded conversations were carefully examined, and preliminary codes were generated directly from the content without imposing pre-existing categories.

The analytical approach drew upon the iterative framework proposed by Miles and Huberman (2002), which guided the research from data collection through to interpretation. Initially, the raw material—including transcripts and observational notes—was condensed through data reduction: this entailed selecting, labelling, and grouping passages related to motivational drivers while discarding extraneous details. Next, the findings were organised and displayed using rich thematic summaries, side-by-side comparison tables, and selected direct quotes that highlighted recurring trends, divergences, and contextual nuances across the three national cohorts. Finally, conclusions were formulated and critically assessed by situating emergent themes within Brunei Darussalam's broader socio-educational landscape. These interpretations were cross-verified using triangulated evidence and participant input, as recommended by Salmons and Kaczynski (2024), to reinforce the study's validity and dependability. This structured yet flexible methodology offers nuanced insights into how

institutional and cultural contexts shape international students' the motivation to learn Arabic.

RESULTS

Reasons Southeast Asian International Students Choose Brunei to Learn Arabic

The findings of this study show that the main factor driving international students' interest in choosing Brunei as a destination for Arabic language study is the high quality of education in local educational institutions, especially in the teaching of Arabic as a second or foreign language. Brunei offers a structured curriculum, supported by competent and experienced teachers, and an adequate educational infrastructure. In addition, a conducive multicultural environment is a particular attraction, as it allows students to interact with people from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, enriching their learning experience. The high security and political and social stability factors in Brunei also influence the decision of students to choose this country. As a country with a large Muslim population, Brunei provides convenience for Muslim students to practice religious teachings, such as access to mosques and other Islamic activities. This creates a sense of comfort and supports the process of social and religious adaptation. Thus, the combination of superior-quality Arabic-language education, a safe and supportive environment, and a strong Islamic influence makes Brunei an attractive and strategic study destination for international students seeking to explore Arabic

I1 from Indonesia stated, *"The Arabic curriculum here is very systematic and in-depth, suitable for beginners to advanced levels"*. I2 added, *"The lecturers are very competent and easy to consult with, this can be seen from the way they teach using valid references"*. F1 from the Philippines said, *"I feel that my learning progress has improved tremendously because of the interactive teaching methods"*. F3 said, *"The material taught is not only about grammar but also Arabic culture, which is very helpful for comprehension,"* and M1 from Malaysia argued, *"Here I can learn Arabic in a comfortable and professional academic atmosphere."*

The presence of experienced and competent teaching staff is the main attraction of the Arabic study program at UNISSA, as evidenced by observation data showing that lecturers have educational backgrounds from well-known universities in Arab countries and teaching experience in various countries. I3 from Indonesia stated, *"Our lecturers not only teach, but also understand our difficulties as non-native learners,"* I4 added, *"They are patient and know how to overcome our difficulties in speaking and writing,"* The multicultural environment at UNISSA provides a unique opportunity for international students to interact with different cultures and enrich their learning experiences, with observational data during the

research period showing that the campus has a diverse student community from Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. I1 from Indonesia stated, *"I was able to learn a lot about the culture of Brunei and other countries from my classmates."* I2 added, *"Interaction with friends from different countries makes me more open and flexible"*. F1 from the Philippines argued, *"Here I learned to appreciate differences, it's important when learning a language that is also thick with its Culture."*

As a country with a Muslim population, Brunei provides Muslim students with convenient access to worship, creates a sense of comfort, and supports the process of religious adaptation, as evidenced by the campus's well-maintained mosque and adequate worship facilities. I1 from Indonesia stated, *"The mosque on campus is very close and clean, so I can pray five times comfortably."* I2 added, *"There are Islamic activities every day, it brings me closer to religion."* F1 from the Philippines said, *"I am happy to be able to wear the hijab without any discrimination and it is even well received"*.

F3 said, *"Here I can fast and worship with a fully supportive environment,"* and M1 from Malaysia said, *"The Islamic atmosphere here is very strong and makes me feel at home."* The campus has a special unit for Islamic affairs that assists students in their daily worship needs. The educational facilities and infrastructure at UNISSA are very adequate, supporting student learning activities effectively, and the campus facilities are designed to meet the academic and social needs of international students. I3 from Indonesia stated, *"The library is complete with Arabic books and comfortable study spaces."* The library has a digital collection accessible 24 hours a day via an online system. I4 added, *"The internet connection on campus is very stable, very helpful when researching or presenting online."* F2 from the Philippines said, *"The classroom is equipped with a good projector and sound system, so learning is more effective."*

I1 from Indonesia stated, *"Studying here not only adds language skills, but also cultural and social insights,"* I2 added, *"I feel more confident in speaking Arabic after studying here."* F1 from the Philippines said, *"This experience really paved the way for my career in translation."* F3 said, *"I am happy to be able to learn while experiencing real international life,"* and M3 from Malaysia said, *"Studying here makes me better prepared for global challenges."*

Support from the campus and the student community is an important factor in the comfort of international students while studying in Brunei. I3 from Indonesia stated, *"The campus was very responsive to our complaints and input."* I4 added, *"There is a special unit for international student affairs, so we don't get confused when there is a problem."* F2 from the Philippines said, *"The student community is very friendly and supportive; it makes me adjust quickly."* F4 shared, *"There are a lot of social activities that help us make friends,"* while M4

from Malaysia remarked, "I feel cared for and valued as an international student here." Regarding academic and personal support, I5 noted, "The counselling and academic guidance services really helped me overcome difficulties in my studies." Another student, F3, mentioned, "Alumni often reach out to offer advice and career connections—it makes us feel we're not alone after graduation." The majority of international students expressed satisfaction with their experience. I1 from Indonesia stated, "I have already recommended this program to friends in Indonesia," and I2 added, "If there is an opportunity, I would like to continue my undergraduate studies here."

Aligning Student Goals and the Reality of Language Learning in Brunei

The study's findings show that students' goals in learning Arabic in Brunei are to improve their linguistic competence; these goals are integrated with local conditions and Malay culture. Despite the gap between initial expectations and reality in the field, most students still adapt and focus on their learning goals. Many of them previously believed that Brunei, as a developed country, had a modern technology-based education system. However, the reality is that the teaching methods tend to be less interactive and rely on minimal technology, which can be disappointing. In addition, the assumption that Brunei is heavily influenced by Western culture is not supported by the facts, as Malay-Islamic culture is actually very dominant and shapes the learning process. However, the majority of respondents stated that their initial goals were still achieved thanks to the sound quality of educational services, a conducive academic atmosphere, and support for Islamic values that enrich language understanding in a cultural context. This shows that despite the difference between expectations and reality, a supportive educational environment is a factor in achieving their learning goals.

Students emphasised that their primary motivation for studying Arabic at UNISSA was to gain a deep structural understanding of the language, rather than merely acquiring conversational fluency. As I1 stated, "My purpose in studying here is to understand the structure of the Arabic language more deeply." This sentiment was echoed by F2, who explained, "I want to master Arabic phonology and morphology so that I can read the Qur'an better." M3 added that the program provided systematic grammatical training: "Studying here helped me understand grammar systematically." I4 further clarified that Arabic competence involves more than speech—it requires analytical engagement with linguistic forms: "Arabic is not only a matter of speaking, but also of understanding the forms of words and sentences." F3 similarly expressed a desire to access classical Islamic texts more effectively. Collectively, these accounts reveal a pedagogical orientation centred on linguistic rigour and textual hermeneutics. Students view Arabic not as

a utilitarian tool but as a key to unlocking religious knowledge and engaging directly with foundational Islamic sources.

Learning Arabic at UNISSA is deeply embedded in Brunei's Malay-Islamic sociocultural context, a dimension that students found both enriching and meaningful. M1 observed, "Arabic here is not only about theory, but also about how it is used in the local context." I3 expressed appreciation for this integration: "I am happy to be able to learn how Arabic is used in the context of Islam in Brunei." F4 noted the cultural depth of the experience: "We not only learn the language, but also the Malay culture, which is very thick." M2 highlighted the linguistic continuity between Arabic and local vocabulary: "There are a lot of local terms that use Arabic, so I understand better." I2 added that this cultural-linguistic fusion deepened his social awareness: "The integration of culture and language makes me appreciate the social context here more." For these students, Arabic was not an isolated academic subject but a living component of daily religious and communal life in Brunei. They encountered the language through local practices—prayer, sermons, religious education, and social etiquette—making their learning experiential and contextually grounded. This immersion helped demystify classical texts by connecting them to real-world usage. Rather than perceiving Arabic as foreign or archaic, students came to see it as an integral part of Brunei's identity.

Many students arrived at UNISSA with high expectations shaped by Brunei's reputation as a developed and technologically advanced nation, only to encounter a more traditional instructional environment. F1 admitted, "I thought the education system here would be more sophisticated, but it turns out that the methods are still conventional." I4 shared a similar realisation: "I used to think that all classes used technology; in fact, there are still many that are face-to-face." M4 expressed surprise given the country's development status: "My expectations are high because Brunei is a developed country, but it turns out that the teaching method is not interactive." F3 noted a gap between assumption and reality: "I think all lecturers use multimedia, but the reality is that there are still many who use whiteboards." I1 concluded candidly, "My expectations are higher than the reality I experienced in class." These reflections reveal a significant dissonance between students' anticipations—often influenced by global trends in digital education—and the actual classroom practices they encountered. While the university's infrastructure appeared modern, the pedagogical application of technology remained limited. International students, accustomed to dynamic, tech-enhanced learning platforms, found the conventional lecture format less engaging.

Students frequently critiqued the lack of interactivity in classroom instruction, describing teaching methods as predominantly one-way and passive. M3 characterised the approach as monotonous: "The teaching method feels monotonous; there is rarely any discussion or simulation." F2 expressed a desire for greater engagement: "We want to be more active, but lecturers are often just lecturing." I2 linked this to declining interest: "The lack of technology makes the learning process less interesting." M1 hoped for more digital integration: "I hope to be able to use apps or digital media more." F4 found the style overly rigid: "The teaching methods here are a bit rigid, not as interactive as I imagined." Despite acknowledging the academic rigour of the content, students felt that pedagogical delivery failed to stimulate critical participation or collaborative learning. The absence of discussions, group work, or problem-based activities is limited. This traditional format, while effective for transmitting structured linguistic knowledge, did not fully accommodate diverse learning preferences or the interactive norms of contemporary higher education. Students' feedback points to a pedagogical gap: even when content is strong, delivery matters.

Several students experienced initial cultural disorientation upon discovering that Brunei's social environment was far more conservative and Islamically oriented than they had anticipated. I3 remarked, "I think Brunei is more modern and open, but it is very conservative." F1 added, "At first I thought western culture was more dominant, but in fact it was traditional." M2 expressed genuine surprise: "I am surprised how strong Islamic values are here." I4 noted the visible norms on campus: "The dress code and etiquette are very strict, that's what I didn't expect." F3 admitted, "I thought the culture here would be freer, but it turned out to be very well-maintained." These accounts reflect a common misconception among international students—that economic development correlates with Westernisation. Instead, they encountered a society where Malay-Islamic identity is actively preserved and institutionalised through daily practices, campus regulations, and public conduct. While this initially caused culture shock, many students gradually came to appreciate the coherence and spiritual depth of this environment. The consistency between religious values and social behaviour lent authenticity to their learning experience. Over time, what seemed restrictive became meaningful, offering a model of how Islamic principles can shape public and academic life.

Despite initial challenges, most students successfully adapted to UNISSA's academic and cultural environment, attributing their adjustment to supportive social and physical conditions. M4 reflected, "Although I was a little shocked at first, I was able to adapt because the academic environment was good." I1 praised the campus atmosphere: "The campus atmosphere is very calm and conducive to

learning." F2 highlighted interpersonal support: "I adapted quickly because my friends and lecturers were very supportive." M3 acknowledged that even conventional methods felt comfortable in this setting: "Although the method is conventional, the learning atmosphere is still comfortable." I2 emphasised focus and tranquillity: "I can focus because the campus is not noisy and the learning atmosphere is maintained." These testimonies underscore the critical role of environmental factors in student adaptation. The quiet, orderly campus, combined with accessible peers and approachable faculty, created a buffer against early disorientation. Social integration—facilitated through informal mentoring, classroom interactions, and communal activities—proved instrumental in easing the transition. Significantly, the stability of the academic rhythm and clarity of behavioural expectations reduced anxiety and allowed students to redirect energy toward learning. This suggests that institutional culture, even when traditional, can foster resilience and belonging when it provides consistency, safety, and relational warmth.

The integration of Islamic values into Arabic language instruction profoundly enriched students' learning experiences, lending spiritual and ethical dimensions to linguistic study. F1 observed, "The Islamic values here are very strong, making me appreciate the Arabic language even more." M1 added, "Learning is more meaningful because it is associated with the Islamic context." I3 noted a deeper semantic understanding: "I have come to understand the meaning of Arabic words better because they are brought in a religious context." F4 emphasised lived practice: "Islam here is not just a theory, but applied in everyday life." M2 connected language to worship: "I feel closer to Arabic because it is learned in the context of worship." For these learners, Arabic ceased to be a neutral academic subject and became a sacred medium through which faith, ethics, and identity intersect. The consistent alignment between classroom content and real-world religious practice—such as prayer, Quranic recitation, and ethical conduct—transformed abstract grammar rules into pathways for spiritual connection.

While critical of teaching methods, students consistently commended UNISSA's administrative services and physical infrastructure. I4 acknowledged, "The facilities are good, although the methods are mediocre." F3 affirmed the quality of support: "The academic service here is quite good and friendly." M3 recognised faculty professionalism: "The lecturers are professional even though the teaching method is not modern." I1 concluded, "Despite the shortcomings, I am still satisfied with the educational service." F2 offered a balanced view: "UNISSA continues to provide good quality education." These positive assessments highlight a crucial distinction between pedagogical delivery and

institutional support. Students appreciated the cleanliness of campus facilities, the availability of learning spaces, and the responsiveness of administrative staff—often receiving replies to inquiries within 24 hours. This reliable support system mitigated frustrations with classroom limitations and contributed significantly to overall satisfaction. In essence, while the instructional approach may not have met all expectations, the broader educational ecosystem functioned effectively.

Ultimately, despite initial misalignments between expectations and reality, the overwhelming majority of students affirmed that their core objective—achieving meaningful proficiency in Arabic—was fulfilled. M4 summarised this sentiment: “Even though it didn't meet my expectations, my goal of learning Arabic was still achieved.” I2 added, “I can still learn a lot even though the methods are not modern.” F1 expressed gratitude: “My goals were initially high, and thank God I was able to achieve them.” M1 credited the environment: “A conducive academic environment keeps me focused.” I3 concluded with satisfaction: “I am happy to be able to learn Arabic with a strong Islamic context.” These reflections reveal a mature recalibration of priorities: students moved beyond superficial metrics of “modernity” to recognise the substantive value of disciplined, values-based education. The combination of a structured curriculum, authentic textual engagement, a supportive community, and a spiritually resonant context enabled deep learning, even without advanced technological tools.

Strategies for Arabic Learning Success in Brunei

The study's findings show that international students from Asia studying in Brunei are implementing various effective strategies to achieve their Arabic learning goals. First, active participation in study groups is a main strategy. Through discussion and collaboration with peers, improve their understanding of language structure and vocabulary interactively. Second, the use of digital learning resources such as learning applications, online learning videos, and online platforms also enriches their learning experience outside the classroom. Third, direct interaction with native speakers, both lecturers and Middle Eastern students in Brunei, provides an opportunity for Asian students to practice speaking and listening skills in a real context. Fourth, participation in extracurricular activities that use Arabic, such as literary clubs or religious activities, helps them integrate its use into everyday situations. These strategies not only help students overcome learning challenges but also increase their motivation and confidence in using Arabic. With a comprehensive and adaptive approach, Asian students can develop strong language skills during their studies in Brunei.

Many Asian students find that studying together in groups significantly strengthens their Arabic language learning. Rather than struggling alone, they lean on peers to clarify confusing points, correct errors, and build shared understanding. As one student, I1, put it: "If you study on your own, sometimes you get confused, but if you discuss with friends, you immediately understand." This collaborative spirit creates a supportive space where mistakes become learning opportunities rather than setbacks. I3 added, "We can correct each other's sentences, which is very helpful," highlighting how peer feedback builds accuracy in real time. Others echoed this sentiment F1 shared that group sessions helped untangle the complexities of Arabic grammar, while F3 noted that regular discussions boosted confidence when presenting in class. M2 summed it up by saying, "Studying with friends is fun and easier to understand than just listening to a lecturer's lecture." This approach reflects a deeper understanding of language as a social practice: fluency rules, but about using the language meaningfully with others.

Beyond face-to-face collaboration, digital tools have become indispensable in how Asian students engage with Arabic outside the classroom. They actively turn to apps, online videos, and digital platforms to supplement their learning in flexible, self-directed ways. I2 explained, "I often use apps like Duolingo and YouTube to learn vocab," showing how everyday technology bridges gaps in formal instruction. F2 appreciated the autonomy this offers: "The learning videos on the internet really helped me learn at my own pace." When classroom explanations fall short, students like I4 rely on the internet for clarity: "If there is something that is not understood in class, I look for an explanation through the internet." F4 emphasised convenience: "Online learning allows me to learn anytime and anywhere, while M1 pointed out its suitability for busy schedules: "Online resources are very flexible and suitable for busy students." This digital fluency reflects a generation that seamlessly integrates technology into their learning process.

Authentic interaction with native Arabic speakers is among the most impactful experiences for students aiming to improve their speaking and listening skills. These real-life conversations offer nuances—intonation, rhythm, colloquial expressions—that textbooks rarely capture. I1 recalled, "The lecturer from Egypt was very helpful to me in improving the pronunciation," underscoring how exposure to native phonology builds accuracy. I3 shared that speaking with Palestinian friends gave him courage: "When I talk to friends from Palestine, I am more courageous to talk." Similarly, F1 learned practical, everyday phrases through friendships: "I learned a lot from my Arab friends, especially in everyday conversations." M3 gained cultural-linguistic awareness: "Interacting with native

speakers makes us know which is formal and which is slang.” Moreover, F3 found consistent practice invaluable: “I often practice talking to friends from Yemen, it’s very beneficial.” These exchanges do more than refine grammar—they humanise the language. Students move from seeing Arabic as an academic subject to viewing it as a living medium of connection.

Social media has quietly emerged as a surprisingly effective channel for informal Arabic learning among Asian students. Platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram, and Telegram are no longer just for socialising—they have become dynamic spaces for language practice. I2 joined a WhatsApp group focused on Arabic: “I joined an Arabic WhatsApp group; many of them gave me study tips.” F2 picks up expressions by observing real usage: “I often watch Arab friends’ stories on IG and learn from their conversations.” M4 appreciates the relaxed atmosphere: “Social media makes learning more relaxing but still effective.” When stuck, I4 turns to Telegram for help: “If anyone is confused, I ask in the Telegram group—many people help.” Even humour plays a role; as F4 noted, “I love learning through memes and funny content in Arabic.” This organic exposure mirrors how children acquire language—through immersion in meaningful, low-key environments that keep the language present in daily life.

Outside formal instruction, many students deepen their Arabic through extracurricular activities that embed the language in cultural and spiritual contexts. Participation in Arabic literature clubs or religious gatherings allows them to use the language in purposeful, meaningful ways. M1 described how poetry discussions enriched understanding: “In literary clubs, we often read Arabic poetry and discuss its meaning.” For F1, religious events expanded vocabulary: “Religious activities help me learn new vocabulary about worship.” I3 gained cultural insight: “I have come to understand the context of Arab culture better through these events.” M2 found renewed enthusiasm: “Participating in religious events makes me more enthusiastic about learning Arabic.” Moreover, F3 practised public speaking: “I often give presentations in Arabic at campus events.” These activities transform Arabic from an academic requirement into a living part of identity and community. Whether reciting verses, analysing classical texts, or engaging in devotional discourse, students connect language to values, emotions, and shared traditions. The informal yet structured nature of these spaces encourages consistent use without the pressure of grades.

When it comes to mastering Arabic grammar—a frequent stumbling block—students rely on personalised, reflective strategies rather than rote memorisation. I1 takes ownership of his learning: “I make my own notes every time I learn grammar.” F2 seeks clarity through examples: “I often ask lecturers to give examples of easier sentences.” M3 emphasises persistence: “Learning grammar

takes constant practice, so I work on the questions a lot." I4 uses active construction to test understanding: "If I'm confused, I try to make my own sentences with the same structure." F4 turns to digital explanations: "I often watch grammar explainer videos on YouTube." These approaches reveal a metacognitive awareness—students do not just absorb rules; they interrogate, apply, and adapt them. By creating their own examples or seeking alternative explanations, they build mental models that go beyond surface-level knowledge. This self-directed engagement transforms grammar from a barrier into a toolkit for expression. It also cultivates resilience; when one method fails, they pivot to another.

Dictionaries and translation tools serve as essential companions in navigating the rich and often unfamiliar terrain of Arabic vocabulary. Students use them strategically—not as crutches, but as launchpads for deeper understanding. I2 acts quickly when encountering unknown words: "When I find a new word, I immediately look up its meaning in an online dictionary." M4 relies on apps for instant support: "I use a translation app to check the meaning when I'm reading text quickly." F1, as a beginner, finds bilingual dictionaries reassuring: "The bilingual dictionary is invaluable for beginners like me." I3 combines lookup with active recall: "I usually write the meaning of the word next to it so that it is easy to remember." Notably, M1 strikes a balance: "Translation helps, but I also learned not to be too dependent." This nuanced approach shows maturity—students recognise that while tools provide initial access, true mastery comes from using words in context, not just knowing their definitions. Writing translations by hand, testing usage in sentences, or comparing multiple sources all deepen retention.

Students also recognise that writing and speaking are deeply intertwined, and they deliberately practice both skills in tandem to reinforce fluency. F3 combines the two through performance: "I often practice writing essays and reading them in front of the class." I1 links presentation to confidence: "The presentation made me more confident and fluent in speaking." M2 practices alone to build comfort: "I often practice speaking to myself in Arabic." F2 integrates reflection and expression: "If I write a journal, I also practice speaking the content." I4 values collaborative rehearsal: "The group presentation exercises are beneficial for speaking skills." This integrated approach mirrors how language functions in real life—ideas are shaped through writing and refined through speech. Writing allows time for precision; speaking demands spontaneity. By cycling between the two, students develop both accuracy and fluency. Rehearsing written work aloud helps internalise sentence structures, while speaking freely generates material worth writing down.

Ultimately, the strategies these students employ do more than improve linguistic competence—they nurture motivation, confidence, and a sense of

personal growth. M3 connects fluency to enthusiasm: “If I can speak fluently, I will be more enthusiastic about learning.” F1 draws pride from achievement: “Every time I make a successful presentation, I feel proud and more confident.” I2 finds joy in the journey: “Learning Arabic is hard, but once you understand it, it’s really fun.” M4 notes a shift in social ease: “I became more confident in talking to Arabs after studying here.” Moreover, F4 tracks progress as a source of drive: “My motivation goes up because I can see my own development.” This emotional dimension is crucial—language learning is as much about identity and self-efficacy as it is about vocabulary or grammar. Each small success reinforces the belief that effort leads to improvement, creating a virtuous cycle of engagement. Confidence grows not from perfection, but from the courage to try, stumble, and try again. In this light, the classroom, study group, or social media feed becomes more than a site of instruction.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that Asian international students are interested in choosing Brunei as a destination because of learning for several main factors, namely the high quality of education, a conducive multicultural environment, socio-political stability, and a strong Islamic influence. Educational institutions in Brunei offer a structured curriculum with comprehensive language instruction, supported by qualified teachers. Although there is a gap between students' initial expectations for modernising the education system and the influence of Western culture in-practice, the majority of students can adapt and still achieve their learning goals thanks to a conducive academic atmosphere that supports Islamic values. To achieve this goal, Asian students use effective strategies such as active participation in study groups, utilising digital learning resources, engaging in direct interaction with native speakers, and participating in Arabic-language extracurricular activities. These strategies not only help improve linguistic skills but also strengthen motivation and confidence in using Arabic.

In the lens of the L2 Motivational Self System theory developed by Zoltán Dörnyei and Self-Determination Theory (SDT), L2MSS explains that motivation in second language learning consists of three main components: Ideal L2 Self, Ought-to L2 Self, and L2 Learning Experience. In the context of this study, the Ideal L2 Self is evident in the motivation of Asian students who view the importance of mastering Arabic as important for future personal and professional achievement (Li & Liu, 2021). Meanwhile, the ought-to L2 Self is reflected in the drive to meet religious or community expectations (Yetkin & Ekin, 2018). Environmental factors such as the quality of education and an intense Islamic atmosphere in Brunei

contribute to a positive L2 Learning Experience (Deci & Ryan, 2008). On the other hand, SDT, as proposed by Deci and Ryan (1985), emphasises the role of three psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and connectedness—in driving intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Students who use active learning strategies, such as interacting with native speakers and engaging in extracurricular activities, show an effort to meet competency and connectedness needs (Ma & Liu, 2016) despite the initial challenges of internal support and an environment that facilitates autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The combination of ideal vision, conducive learning experience, and fulfilment of psychological needs makes Brunei an effective presence and attractive destination for Asian students to learn Arabic.

The push-pull factor theory in the study of educational mobility explains that students are "driven" by internal factors, such as the desire for high-quality education, and "pulled" by external factors, such as Brunei's multicultural environment and socio-political stability. This is with Gardner's motivational theory, which emphasises that integrative motivation—in this case, the desire to understand Islamic culture and values—plays an important role in achieving language-learning goals (Vishkin et al., 2021). In addition, sociocultural theories from Vygotsky show that social interactions and supportive cultural contexts, such as involvement in study groups and interactions with native speakers, accelerate the process of language mastery (Chirkov, 2022). Students' adaptation to local realities can also be explained through acculturation theory, which posits that individuals seek to adjust to a new culture ~~in order~~ to achieve psychological and academic balance (Karim, 2021; Bhowmik, 2021). Thus, the combination of driving factors, intrinsic motivation, social environment support, and adaptive learning strategies makes Brunei ~~an effective~~, practical and attractive destination for Asian students to learn Arabic (Brosh, 2019; Pikri, 2022).

The novelty of these research findings lies in the identification of specific factors that encourage Asian international students to choose Brunei as a destination for Arabic language studies, as well as in the disclosure of the adaptive strategies they use in the learning process. In contrast to the previous five studies that more generally discussed Arabic learning motivation or study destination preferences, this study provides an in-depth analysis of in the Brunei context. Previous studies such as Husna & Mustikawan (2022) which examined the motivation of Yemeni students to choose universities in Malaysia, Wangge and Sariyyah (2022) on the factors of choosing universities in the Middle East for Arabic language studies, Ismaulina and Muhayatsyah, (2020) which discussed the preferences of Chinese students towards Arabic-speaking countries, Ridha et al., (2023) on the experience of Southeast Asian students in Arabic-speaking

universities, and Thamrin, (2020) regarding the perception of international students towards Arabic language education in non-Arab countries, tends to be descriptive and does not explore in detail how students adapt and use concrete strategies in facing learning challenges. The findings in this study make a new contribution by showing that Brunei is not only attractive because of religious and cultural aspects, but also because of students' ability to adapt through innovative learning strategies, such as the use of technology by Madani et al. (2024) and cross-cultural interaction (Prasetyo et al., 2021), which have not been disclosed explicitly in previous studies.

The novelty of this research lies in a holistic approach in identifying and analyzing the factors influencing the selection of Brunei as an Arabic study destination by Asian students, which includes not only the initial driving factors such as the quality of education and Islamic nuances, but also the process of adaptation to local realities as well as the active learning strategies developed by students in facing the gap between expectations and reality. The uniqueness of this research also lies in its specific focus on Brunei, a non-Arab country with socio-political stability and a multicultural environment, which has not been extensively researched in previous studies. In contrast to previous research, which generally only examined destinations' motivations and preferences, this study made a significant contribution by revealing how Asian international students are actively developing innovative learning strategies, such as participation in study groups, use of digital resources, and interaction with native speakers, to achieve their academic goals. In addition, this study also succeeded in showing that student success does not solely depend on external factors such as the quality of the institution, but instead on the individual's ability to adapt and create effective learning mechanisms.

The findings of this study contribute to scientific research by developing a comprehensive model of the interrelationships among motivating factors, adaptation processes, and learning strategies in determining the success of Asian international students learning Arabic in Brunei Darussalam. Theoretically, these findings enrich our understanding of the dynamics of language learning in a stable, multicultural Islamic context and can serve as a foundation for developing motivational theories in foreign language learning that align with student needs.

In practice, this study offers concrete recommendations for educational institutions in Southeast Asia that serve as destinations for Arabic language study for international students. First, academic institutions are encouraged to integrate pedagogical approaches that support active student learning. Second, Arabic-language curricula should integrate digital technology, accounting for the significant infrastructure and digital literacy gaps that remain significant in the

region. Third, campus environments need to be intentionally designed to encourage cross-cultural interactions, such as interreligious discussion forums, cultural exchanges, or cross-border mentorships, thereby strengthening students' social resilience and psychological adaptation.

The global contribution of this study lies in providing an empirical perspective from the Southeast Asian context, which has recently been relatively underrepresented in the literature on Arabic language learning for non-native speakers. These findings broaden the horizons of Arabic as a research by incorporating dimensions of locality, multiculturalism, and Islamic education policies unique to the archipelago, making them relevant for readers of Southeast Asian Studies interested in the intersection of education, language, and identity in the region.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research reveals that Asian students are drawn to Brunei for learning Arabic, not primarily for religious purposes, but rather for practical, goal-oriented motives reinforced by the country's high educational standards, political and social stability, inclusive multicultural setting, and an environment rich in Islamic cultural elements. Although students initially encountered discrepancies between their expectations and actual experiences, they successfully adjusted by adopting a range of adaptive techniques—such as joining peer study circles, leveraging digital tools, engaging in conversations with native speakers, and taking part in Arabic-focused extracurricular programs. These approaches not only enhanced their linguistic proficiency but also bolstered their motivation and self-assurance. Ultimately, Brunei emerged as a valuable and productive location for Arabic language acquisition among Asian learners, thanks to their intrinsic interest, flexibility, and strategic use of learning methods.

The outcomes of this inquiry offer meaningful insights into both the underlying reasons behind Asian students' choice of Brunei for Arabic studies and the practical learning tactics they employ. Nevertheless, the study is constrained by its qualitative design—particularly its reliance on focus group discussions, which yield context-specific data that are not easily generalizable. Additionally, group dynamics during these discussions may subtly affect participants' willingness to express candid views, possibly skewing the findings. To address these limitations, future investigations should consider employing quantitative methods or mixed-method designs to generate more robust, representative, and nuanced evidence.

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