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Arabic Phonological Competence and the Understanding of Islamic Legal Terminology in the Contemporary Era

Abstract: The mastery of Arabic phonology (*Ashwāt al-'Arabiyyah*) plays a fundamental role in the accurate interpretation of classical Islamic texts, yet its contribution to the understanding of Islamic legal terminology remains underexplored in contemporary Islamic education. This study investigates the relationship between Arabic phonological competence and students' understanding of Islamic legal terminology in the contemporary era, particularly within the context of *Salafi* Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) that rely heavily on *kitab kuning* as their primary learning resource. The research aims to assess students' levels of phonological competence, measure their mastery of Islamic legal terminology, and examine the extent to which phonological competence influences legal understanding. Employing a mixed-methods explanatory sequential design, the study collected quantitative data from 120 students via standardised tests measuring Arabic phonological competence and comprehension of Islamic legal terminology. The quantitative phase was followed by qualitative inquiry involving classroom observations, in-depth interviews, and document analysis to explain and contextualise the statistical findings. Quantitative data were analysed using correlation and regression analyses, and qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings demonstrate a statistically significant positive relationship between Arabic phonological competence and the understanding of Islamic legal terminology. Students with higher levels of phonological mastery exhibited greater accuracy in identifying, interpreting, and applying legal concepts embedded in classical *fiqh* texts. Qualitative evidence further reveals that phonological awareness facilitates semantic processing, improves retention of legal concepts, and strengthens comprehension of *qawā'id fiqhiyyah* through recurring sound patterns that function as cognitive anchors. Conversely, inadequate phonological competence frequently led to pronunciation errors, lexical confusion, and misinterpretation of legal meanings. This study contributes to the growing scholarship on Arabic language pedagogy and Islamic legal education by

demonstrating that phonological competence is not merely a linguistic skill but also a crucial cognitive foundation for legal literacy. The findings underscore the need to integrate systematic phonological instruction into contemporary *kitab kuning* learning to enhance students' legal comprehension and interpretive accuracy.

Keywords: Arabic Phonological Competence; Islamic Legal Terminology; *Ashwāt al-'Arabiyyah*; Legal Literacy; *Salaf* Pesantren.

INTRODUCTION

Salaf Islamic boarding schools (*pondok pesantren Salaf*) in Indonesia are traditional Islamic educational institutions that prioritise the transmission of classical Islamic knowledge through the study of authoritative Arabic texts (*kitab kuning*).¹ These disciplines, developed by early Muslim scholars and preserved in Arabic classical texts, form the intellectual foundation of Islamic law, theology, and ethics within pesantren.² In this context, such texts are commonly referred to as *kitab kuning*.³ In the pesantren context, these classical works are commonly referred to as *kitab kuning*. Learning *kitab kuning* relies heavily on reading and oral instruction.⁴ Accordingly, students are required to master not only Arabic grammar but also Arabic phonology (*Ashwāt Arabiyah*) to accurately comprehend textual meaning.⁵ Inaccurate pronunciation may lead to misinterpretation and distortion of meaning,⁶ particularly in legally sensitive texts. Therefore, Arabic

¹ Muhammad Fajrul Alam Ulin Nuha et al., 'Enhancing Administrative Efficiency in Pondok Pesantren: Exploring the Acceptance of E-Santren App System for Administrative Tasks', *Procedia Computer Science* 234 (2024): 795-804, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.procs.2024.03.096>.

² Himawan Bayu Patriadi et al., 'Human Security in Local Wisdom Perspective: Pesantren and Its Responsibility to Protect People', *Procedia Environmental Sciences* 28 (2015): 100-105, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.proenv.2015.07.015>.

³ Edi Suresman et al., 'From Sorogan to Digital Learning: A Systematic Literature Network Analysis of Pesantren Learning Models', *Cogent Education* 12, no. 1 (2025): 2580776, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2025.2580776>.

⁴ Rifqi Silfiana, 'A Traditional and Modern Education System of Pondok Pesantren in Perspective Philosophy of Education', *Islamadina: Jurnal Pemikiran Islam*, 25 April 2020, 43, <https://doi.org/10.30595/islamadina.v0i0.6894>.

⁵ Khalid G. Al-Shdifat et al., 'Comparison between Two Phonological Awareness Tasks in Arabic', *Amper* 12 (June 2024): 100177, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amper.2024.100177>.

⁶ Sahkholid Nasution et al., 'Analyzing Phonetic Errors Among Non-Native Arabic Learners Through Artificial Intelligence', *Arabiyat: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Arab Dan Kebahasaaraban* 12, no. 2 (2025): 229-242, <https://doi.org/10.15408/a.v12i2.47342>.

phonological competence can be understood as a key linguistic component that supports accurate textual comprehension in pesantren-based learning, especially in relation to Islamic legal terminology.⁷

In the context of mastering *Ashwāt Arabiyah*, students in *Salaf* Islamic boarding schools are still confronted with various learning difficulties. These challenges are particularly evident in students' difficulties in reading and understanding *kitab kuning* texts.⁸ During the learning process, many students struggle due to limited mastery of Arabic phonology.⁹ Previous studies indicate that such difficulties are closely related to the distinctive features of the Arabic sound system. Errors in reading often involve mispronouncing sounds that have no equivalent in Indonesian.¹⁰ In addition, students frequently have difficulty correctly positioning their speech organs, resulting in inaccurate sound production.¹¹ The complexity of Arabic phonology—characterised by diverse points of articulation—also makes it difficult for learners to distinguish closely related sounds.¹² Furthermore, students often confuse long and short vowels and struggle to differentiate

⁷ Menik Mahmudah, 'Enhancing Arabic Vocabulary with Hilyah Book', *Al-Muhawaroh: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Arab* 1, no. 1 (2025): 1-11, <https://doi.org/10.38073/almuhawaroh.v1i1.2427>; Nur Hanifansyah et al., 'Religious Drama Controversy: The Impact of Bidaah on Islamic Pedagogy and Media Literacy', *MIQOT: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Keislaman* 49, no. 2 (2025): 314, <https://doi.org/10.30821/miqot.v49i2.1407>.

⁸ Toat Haryanto et al., 'Shorof as an Essential Foundation in Understanding Classical Islamic Texts to Strengthen Students' Competence in Islamic Knowledge', *Lugawiyat* 7, no. 1 (2025): 42-51, <https://doi.org/10.18860/lg.v7i1.31728>.

⁹ Fahmi Makraja and Ulil Azmi, 'Challenges of Students In Learning The Islamic Yellow Book at Dayah Raudhatul Qur'an Darussalam, Aceh Besar, Indonesia', *DAYAH: Journal of Islamic Education* 6, no. 2 (2023): 171, <https://doi.org/10.22373/jie.v6i2.17309>.

¹⁰ Sri Nabilah Utami et al., 'Analysis of Student's Arabic Reading Pronunciation Characteristics on Discourse Text "Madrasati"', *International Journal of Arabic Language Teaching* 5, no. 01 (2023): 53-67, <https://doi.org/10.32332/ijalt.v5i01.6819>.

¹¹ Mohammed Algabri et al., 'Mispronunciation Detection and Diagnosis with Articulatory-Level Feedback Generation for Non-Native Arabic Speech', *Mathematics* 10, no. 15 (2022): 2727, <https://doi.org/10.3390/math10152727>.

¹² Raji Mohammed et al., 'Reading Disabilities in Arabic-Speaking Learners: A Comprehensive Systematic Review of Screening Tests and Challenges Ahead', *International Journal of Educational Research Open* 9 (December 2025): 100541, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedro.2025.100541>.

emphatic and non-emphatic consonants, contrasts that are absent in the Indonesian phonetic system.¹³

Another major challenge students face is understanding Islamic legal terminology. This problem is reflected in limited comprehension of legal terms, which often leads to misinterpretation of *kitab kuning* texts, errors in religious practice and social transactions (*mu'āmalah*), and inadequate mastery of *uṣūl al-fiqh*. Several factors influence this difficulty. First, students often lack an adequate understanding of the structure of Islamic legal sciences and the hierarchy of legal rulings,¹⁴ resulting in an inability to grasp the functional and contextual meaning of legal terms.¹⁵ Second, the predominantly monologic instructional approach in pesantren—centred on reading,¹⁶ listening, and memorisation—tends to reduce legal terminology to memorised forms rather than conceptual tools for legal reasoning.¹⁷ Third, the concise and densely structured nature of *kitab kuning* texts, which rarely provide explicit definitions or illustrative examples, further limits students' ability to interpret legal terminology independently.¹⁸

Studies of Islamic law have generally focused on four main issues. First, research examining Islamic law through the lens of Arabic language proficiency emphasises that accurate reading and comprehension of Arabic meaning are essential prerequisites for the

¹³ Akla Akla and Muyassaroh Muyassaroh, 'Arabic Phonetics and Phonemics Instruction in Islamic Boarding School for Children', *An Nabighoh* 26, no. 2 (2024): 303–314, <https://doi.org/10.32332/an-nabighoh.v26i2.303-314>.

¹⁴ Alfina Habibatur Rahmah et al., 'Challenges and Pedagogical Strategies in Arabic Pegon Learning for Modern Pesantren Alumni at Islamic Universities', *J-PAI: Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam* 11, no. 2 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.18860/jpai.v11i2.32410>.

¹⁵ Taufikin Taufikin et al., 'Building Islamic Legal Awareness in Young Santri: The Dynamics of Taklif Understanding and Application in Islamic Boarding School', *FENOMENA* 17, no. 1 (2025), <https://journal.uinsi.ac.id/index.php/fenomena/article/view/10315>.

¹⁶ Sri Nabilah Utami et al., 'Analysis of Student's Arabic Reading Pronunciation Characteristics on Discourse Text "مَدْرَسَتِي"', *International Journal of Arabic Language Teaching* 5, no. 01 (2023): 53–67, <https://doi.org/10.32332/ijalt.v5i01.6819>.

¹⁷ Suteja Suteja et al., 'The Implementation of Sorogan Methods for Santri Islamic Boarding School in Classical Islamic Book (Kitab Kuning)', *Edukasia: Jurnal Penelitian Pendidikan Islam* 17, no. 1 (2022): 121, <https://doi.org/10.21043/edukasia.v17i1.13784>.

¹⁸ Rosidin Rosidin et al., 'The Development History of the Yellow Book (Kitab Kuning) as Islamic Textbooks in Indonesia Based on the Philology Perspective:', paper presented at International Symposium on Religious Literature and Heritage (ISLAGE 2021), Malang, Indonesia, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.220206.030>.

correct application of Islamic legal rulings. Insufficient proficiency in Arabic has been shown to result in weak comprehension of Islamic law, and a positive relationship has been identified between Arabic proficiency and improved legal understanding.¹⁹ Other studies further demonstrate that understanding Islamic legal terminology requires not only linguistic competence but also methodological and contextual mastery of fiqh.²⁰ Second, another body of research explores the integration of Islamic law with national legal systems.²¹ These studies indicate that the transformation of Islamic law in Indonesia does not rely solely on religious norms but is largely shaped by state legal and political dynamics.²² National law is not fully absorbed into Islamic law; instead, it is incorporated through selective codification and hybrid mechanisms. The transformation process does not occur in a confrontational manner, but rather through the combined processes of legislation, jurisprudence, and public policy.²³ Third, studies on legal conservatism focus on the reinterpretation of classical fiqh texts to align them with contemporary issues such as human rights, gender equality, and technological advancement. These works seek to critically reassess traditional legal interpretations to maintain their relevance in modern socio-cultural contexts.

¹⁹ Syamsul Anwar, 'The Relation between Arabic Linguistics and Islamic Legal Reasoning: Islamic Legal Theory Perspective', *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 55, no. 2 (2017): 463-492, <https://doi.org/10.14421/ajis.2017.552.463-492>; Buhori Muslim et al., 'The Arabic Language Contribution to The Istimbāt in Islamic Law of Acehnese Scholars', *Samarah: Jurnal Hukum Keluarga Dan Hukum Islam* 6, no. 1 (2022): 224, <https://doi.org/10.22373/sjhk.v6i1.11732>.

²⁰ Nahla A. K. Alhirtani, 'The Influence of Arabic Language Learning on Understanding of Islamic Legal Sciences—A Study in the Sultan Idris Education University', *International Education Studies* 11, no. 2 (2018): 55, <https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v11n2p55>; Ihsan Sa'dudin et al., 'The Arabic's Significant Role In The Understanding Of Islamic Law', *Eralingua: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Asing Dan Sastra* 6, no. 2 (2022): 371, <https://doi.org/10.26858/eralingua.v6i2.34716>.

²¹ Anis Mashdurohatun et al., 'Contemporary Reassessment of Punishment in Islamic and Secular Law: A Comparative Study of Justice and Penal Philosophy', *MILRev: Metro Islamic Law Review* 5, no. 1 (2026): 80-100, <https://doi.org/10.32332/milrev.v5i1.11887>.

²² Ahmad Agus Ramdlany et al., 'Integrating Fiqhiyyah Legal Maxims and Positive Law Principles in the Formation of Indonesia's New National Criminal Code', *Nusantara: Journal of Law Studies* 5, no. 1 (2026): 453-484, <https://doi.org/10.66325/nusantaralaw.v5i1.156>.

²³ Ahmad Yani and Megawati Barthos, 'Transforming Islamic Law in Indonesia from a Legal Political Perspective', *Al-Ahkam* 30, no. 2 (2020): 159-178, <https://doi.org/10.21580/ahkam.2020.30.2.6333>; Moh. Yasir et al., 'Islamic Law and National Law (Comparative Study of Islamic Criminal Law and Indonesian Criminal Law)', *Al Hurriyah: Jurnal Hukum Islam* 6, no. 2 (2022): 82, <https://doi.org/10.30983/alhurriyah.v6i2.4952>.

Fourth, interdisciplinary approaches to Islamic legal studies integrate Islamic law with linguistics, sociology, and legal anthropology. This line of research emphasises that Islamic law cannot be fully understood through doctrinal analysis alone but requires broader engagement with social structures, cultural practices, and linguistic systems.²⁴ Solehudin and Arisandi investigated language interference in Arabic learning at an Islamic boarding school in Indonesia.²⁵ Their findings revealed that phonological interference was one of the most significant challenges, particularly in the mispronunciation of Arabic sounds absent in students' native languages. The study demonstrated that phonological interference significantly affects students' confidence and linguistic performance. Although this study successfully mapped patterns of phonological interference, it did not extend its analysis to how such errors influence the understanding of Islamic legal texts or juridical terminology. This gap indicates that although phonological interference has been linguistically explored, its impact on Islamic legal comprehension remains underexamined.

Previous studies on Islamic legal understanding have primarily emphasised Arabic language proficiency in terms of grammar and vocabulary, as well as methodological and sociological approaches to Islamic law. While these studies demonstrate the importance of linguistic competence and contextual interpretation, they rarely address the specific role of Arabic phonological mastery in shaping comprehension of legal terminology. In parallel, research on Arabic phonology in *pesantren* contexts has largely focused on pronunciation accuracy, phonological interference, and second-language acquisition. However, these studies tend to examine phonology as a linguistic performance issue rather than as a factor influencing conceptual understanding of Islamic legal texts. This study positions itself at the intersection of these two strands of research by examining how Arabic phonological

²⁴ Azizah Azis et al., 'Sociological Considerations For Islamic Law's Application And Experience In Indonesia', *International Journal of Education, Vocational and Social Science* 2, no. 03 (2023), <https://e-journal.citakonsultindo.or.id/index.php/IJEVSS/article/view/456>; Sansyrbay Chukhanov and Kairat Kurmanbayev, 'The Correlation of Islamic Law Basics and Linguistics', *Specialty Journal of Politics and Law* 1, nos 1-2016 (2016): 14-19; Doli Witro et al., 'Anthropology of Islamic Law as an Approach in the Practice of Buying and Selling Online', *Qawānīn Journal of Economic Syaria Law* 6, no. 1 (2022): 36-52, <https://doi.org/10.30762/qawanin.v6i1.18>.

²⁵ Muhamad Solehudin and Yusuf Arisandi, 'Language Interference in Arabic Learning: A Case Study of Islamic Boarding Schools in Indonesia', *Al-Ta'rib : Jurnal Ilmiah Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Arab IAIN Palangka Raya* 12, no. 2 (2024): 423-438, <https://doi.org/10.23971/altarib.v12i2.9170>.

mastery relates to students' understanding of Islamic legal terminology. By doing so, it addresses an underexplored dimension of previous scholarship: the role of phonology in supporting semantic processing and legal comprehension in the context of *kitab kuning* learning.

This research aims to analyse the relationship between mastery of *Ashwāt Arabiyah* and comprehension of Islamic legal terminology among students in *Salaf* Islamic boarding schools through the reading of *kitab kuning*. In this study, mastery of *Ashwāt Arabiyah* is understood as the ability to articulate, discriminate, and perceive Arabic sounds accurately in accordance with the Arabic phonological system.²⁶ This mastery includes competence in *makhṛij al-ḥurūf* (points of articulation), *ṣifāt al-ḥurūf* (phonetic features), distinctions in vowel length, and discrimination between closely related sounds.²⁷ Mastery of *Ashwāt Arabiyah* aims to ensure accurate phonetic perception and prevent mispronunciation.²⁸ Sensitivity to phonological distinctions is essential for semantic comprehension, as variations in sound may alter the meaning of words or expressions.²⁹ In educational contexts, phonological patterns—including repetition and sound similarity—have been shown to support memory retention and facilitate the internalisation of complex linguistic structures. In the context of pesantren education, mastery of Arabic phonology is a core competence for students, serving as a foundation for reading and interpreting *kitab kuning*.³⁰ Inadequate phonological mastery may lead to distortion of legal meaning in classical fiqh

²⁶ Janet C. E. Watson, *The Phonology and Morphology of Arabic* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

²⁷ Sane Yagi et al., 'Arabic Punctuation Dataset', Data in Brief 53 (April 2024): 110118, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dib.2024.110118>.

²⁸ Sami Boudelaa et al., 'The Differential Effects of Consonant and Vowel Diacritics in Arabic', *Journal of Memory and Language* 138 (October 2024): 104533, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jml.2024.104533>.

²⁹ Amna Asif et al., 'An Approach for Pronunciation Classification of Classical Arabic Phonemes Using Deep Learning', *Applied Sciences* 12, no. 1 (2021): 238, <https://doi.org/10.3390/app12010238>.

³⁰ Imam Tabroni et al., 'The Arabic Language as A Basic Epistem in The Scientific Tradition of Islamic Boarding School Education', *International Journal of Educational Research & Social Sciences* 3, no. 6 (2022): 2318-2324, <https://doi.org/10.51601/ijersc.v3i6.564>.

texts.³¹ Therefore, *Ashwāt Arabiyah* plays an important role in supporting accurate comprehension of Islamic religious texts.³²

Islamic legal terminology refers to phrases and expressions employed in the study of fiqh and *uṣūl al-fiqh* that carry both lexical and technical meanings. Linguistically, understanding Islamic legal terms involves identifying the basic meanings of Arabic words.³³ Terminologically, it requires interpreting words and sentences to arrive at a proper legal understanding.³⁴ Comprehension of Islamic legal terminology, therefore, demands linguistic precision to grasp both lexical meaning and technical legal usage. For this reason, comprehensive mastery of Arabic, including competence in *Ashwāt Arabiyah*, is essential for proper understanding of Islamic legal texts.³⁵ Understanding Islamic legal terminology has direct implications for legal reasoning, ritual practice, and social transactions (*mu'āmalah*).³⁶ It thus becomes evident that there is a strong relationship between mastery of *Ashwāt Arabiyah* and comprehension of Islamic legal terminology. This relationship extends beyond the phonological dimension to encompass semantic and pedagogical aspects. From a phonological perspective, accurate pronunciation of each letter is critical to determining meaning.

Errors in sound production may lead to misunderstanding or distortion of Islamic legal terms. Semantically, accurate articulation influences the perception of meaning.³⁷ Students who can correctly discriminate Arabic sounds are better equipped to distinguish

³¹ Izzat Muhammad Daud et al., 'Problems of Transliteration of Fiqh Legal Terms (Library Research on The Book Al-Fiqh Al-Islami Wa Adillatuhu Using the Al-Munawwir Dictionary)', *Journal of Social Work and Science Education* 5, no. 1 (2024): 207–18, <https://doi.org/10.52690/jswse.v5i1.649>.

³² Montasser Mahmoud, 'Translating Islamic Religious Expressions: Problems and Strategies', SSRN Scholarly Paper no. 5376676 (Social Science Research Network, 30 April 2015), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5376676>.

³³ Sri Wahyuni, 'Islamic Law in Indonesia (History and Prospects)', *Batulis Civil Law Review* 4, no. 1 (2023): 6, <https://doi.org/10.47268/ballrev.v4i1.1146>.

³⁴ Ahmad Jalili, 'Teori Maqashid Syariah Dalam Hukum Islam', *TERAJU* 3, no. 02 (2021): 71–80, <https://doi.org/10.35961/teraju.v3i02.294>.

³⁵ Anwar, 'The Relation between Arabic Linguistics and Islamic Legal Reasoning'.

³⁶ Daud et al., 'Problems of Transliteration of Fiqh Legal Terms (Library Research on The Book Al-Fiqh Al-Islami Wa Adillatuhu Using the Al-Munawwir Dictionary)'.

³⁷ Andreas Widoff, 'Towards a Domain-Neutral Prepositional Semantics', *Lingua* 298 (January 2024): 103624, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lingua.2023.103624>.

between legal terms with close phonetic similarities. Pedagogically, accurate mastery of *Ashwāt Arabiyah* facilitates the learning of kitab kuning.³⁸ Proper pronunciation enhances both decoding and comprehension during reading. Ultimately, understanding legal terminology emerges from phonetic accuracy, developed through structured, continuous reading practice.³⁹

Mastery of *Ashwāt Arabiyah* has become increasingly essential for students as a foundational competence for understanding Islamic legal terminology. Inadequate phonological mastery often results in misinterpretation of legal terms in kitab kuning texts. This study implicitly assesses students' mastery of Arabic phonology and their understanding of Islamic legal terminology. In line with this objective, the following research question is formulated: What is the level of mastery of *Ashwāt Arabiyah* among students of *Salaf* Islamic boarding schools in reading the Kitab Kuning? How well do students in *Salaf* Islamic boarding schools understand Islamic legal terminology in the reading of Kitab Kuning? What is the relationship between mastery of *Ashwāt Arabiyah* and understanding of Islamic legal terminology in *Salaf* Islamic boarding schools?

The findings of this study make an important contribution by highlighting the urgency of mastering *Ashwāt Arabiyah* for students in *Salaf* Islamic boarding schools to understand Islamic legal terminology. This study is grounded in four main arguments. First, the linguistic argument posits that the accuracy of Arabic phonology strongly determines semantic accuracy in kitab kuning texts. Islamic legal terms derived from classical fiqh, *uṣūl al-fiqh*, and qawā'id literature are highly sensitive to phonological variation. Changes in sound may result in shifts in legal meaning, juridical classification, and even legal conclusions. Second, the epistemological argument asserts that Arabic functions as the primary medium for the transmission of Islamic legal knowledge through classical Arabic

³⁸ Abdulloh Muhlas et al., 'Innovative Methods to Learning Kitab Kuning at Elementary School', *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 14, no. 2 (2024): 68-77, <https://doi.org/10.38073/jpi.v14i2.1767>.

³⁹ Shair Ali Khan, 'The Distinction between Term and Word: A Translator and Interpreter Problem and the Role of Teaching Terminology', *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 232 (October 2016): 696-704, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2016.10.095>.

texts. Legal terminology extends beyond lexical units to encompass conceptual, methodological, and historical dimensions. Consequently, phonological inaccuracies pose a serious obstacle to students' comprehension of sentence structures, conceptual relationships, and legal frameworks in kitab kuning. Third, from a pedagogical standpoint, the tradition of kitab kuning instruction in *Salaf* pesantren relies heavily on oral reading practices that demand phonological precision. Mastery of *Ashwāt Arabiyah* constitutes the initial stage before students can proceed to semantic interpretation, legal reasoning, and textual comprehension. Fourth, from the perspective of scholarly tradition in *Salaf* pesantren, accurate pronunciation is emphasised to preserve the authenticity of knowledge transmission. Distortion in pronunciation may compromise the original textual message and undermine the integrity of scholarly transmission. Therefore, mastery of *Ashwāt Arabiyah* is a crucial pillar that must be upheld within the pesantren's intellectual tradition.

METHOD

The research employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative methods.⁴⁰ An explanatory sequential design was used,⁴¹ in which quantitative data were collected and analysed first, followed by qualitative data to interpret the findings further.⁴² The quantitative data were obtained using two main instruments: (1) an Arabic phonological proficiency test and (2) an Islamic legal terminology comprehension test. The phonological test was designed to assess students' ability to accurately articulate Arabic sounds, including *makhārij al-ḥurūf*, *ṣifāt al-ḥurūf*, vowel length distinctions, and minimal-pair discrimination. The legal terminology test measured students' understanding of key fiqh and *uṣūl al-fiqh* concepts through multiple-choice and short-answer items that required both definitional and contextual interpretation.

⁴⁰ James P. Takona, 'Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches / Sixth Edition', *Quality & Quantity* 58, no. 1 (2024): 1011-1013, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-023-01798-2>.

⁴¹ John W. Creswell, 'My 35 Years in Mixed Methods Research', *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* 18, no. 3 (2024): 203-215, <https://doi.org/10.1177/15586898241253892>.

⁴² J. W. Creswell, *A Concise Introduction to Mixed Methods Research* (SAGE Publications, Inc., 2021).

Both instruments were developed based on established Arabic phonology and Islamic legal studies literature and were reviewed by subject-matter experts to ensure content validity. A pilot test was conducted with a subset of students to refine item clarity and difficulty. Reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha indicated acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha > 0.70$) for both instruments. Scoring was based on the accuracy and completeness of responses. Phonological performance was evaluated using a structured rubric focusing on articulation accuracy and sound discrimination, while legal terminology comprehension was assessed based on correct identification, interpretation, and application of legal terms.

The participants in this study were students from a *Salaf* Islamic boarding school. A total of 120 students were selected using a purposive sampling technique, a non-probability approach, based on their active involvement in *kitab kuning* learning through oral transmission (*talaqqī*). This criterion ensured that participants had sufficient exposure to Arabic phonology and Islamic legal texts relevant to the study objectives. The sample included students at different levels of study within the pesantren, representing varying degrees of learning experience. In addition to students, several instructors (*ustaz*) were involved as key informants to provide complementary qualitative data. Demographically, participants varied in gender and educational level, providing a broader representation of students' phonological competence and legal understanding within the pesantren context.

Data were collected through tests, observations, and interviews. Phonological tests were administered in collaboration with *kitab kuning* instructors to assess students' mastery of *Ashwāt Arabiyah*. Classroom observations were conducted to gather data on students' understanding of Islamic legal terminology during the learning process, including the relationship between phonological mastery and legal comprehension. Researchers directly participated in learning activities to obtain in-depth observational data. Interviews were conducted with both students and instructors to provide additional insights into phonological competence and legal understanding. These maxims were not part of the

formal test instruments but emerged organically during classroom observations and interviews as recurring linguistic patterns.

Data analysis was conducted using both quantitative and qualitative techniques. Quantitative analysis included prerequisite testing through normality and homogeneity tests to ensure the suitability of the data for further analysis. Subsequently, Descriptive statistics were used to determine students' mastery levels, and an independent-samples t-test was conducted to examine differences by learning duration. Qualitative analysis followed several stages. First, data coding was conducted for observation and interview transcripts. Second, conceptual categories were developed from verified stable data. Third, classification was performed to group related findings. Fourth, analytical patterns were formulated as hypotheses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Level of Arabic Phonological Mastery among Students in *Salaf* Pesantren in Reading Kitab Kuning

The quantitative analysis indicates that students' overall mastery of *Ashwāt Arabiyah* at Pondok Pesantren Darullughah Wadda'wah falls within the moderate proficiency category. The statistical results from phonological tests indicate considerable variation among students. While some students demonstrated a satisfactory level of articulation accuracy, a significant number showed persistent difficulties in accurately producing specific Arabic sounds, particularly phonemes absent from the Indonesian sound system. Based on the test results, students demonstrated relatively strong performance in producing alveolar and dental sounds (e.g., د, ن, ب, ت), but showed weaker performance in pronouncing guttural sounds (e.g., ح, غ, خ), emphatic consonants (e.g., ط, ظ, ص), and interdental sounds (e.g., ذ, ظ, ث). The most frequent mispronunciation patterns involved substitutions such as ك → ق, ز → د, س → ث, and د → ض, indicating challenges in distinguishing places and manners of articulation.

Normality and homogeneity tests confirmed that the dataset met the assumptions for parametric analysis. Subsequently, a t-test analysis revealed statistically significant differences in phonological performance among students based on learning duration and prior Arabic exposure. Students with longer tenure in *kitab kuning* instruction scored significantly higher in phonological accuracy compared to those in the early stages of learning. This finding suggests a strong correlation between exposure duration and phonological development.

Qualitative data obtained through classroom observation and interviews further illuminate these quantitative results. Observational data revealed that phonological errors occurred frequently during oral recitation, particularly when students encountered lexical items with complex consonant clusters or unfamiliar phonemic contrasts. Many students hesitated and repeated words during oral reading, indicating uncertainty in articulating certain sounds correctly. Interviews with instructors revealed that phonological challenges were not merely technical but were also influenced by students' linguistic backgrounds. Students originating from different regions tended to transfer phonological patterns from their local dialects into their Arabic pronunciation. For instance, students from Sulawesi frequently substituted س with ث, Lombok students substituted ذ with س, while Banjar students replaced ز with ج. These dialectal interferences consistently appeared in both formal reading sessions and informal language use.

Furthermore, observations indicated that instructors' corrections of pronunciation were often immediate but unsystematic. In most cases, teachers corrected mispronunciations spontaneously during recitation without providing explicit phonetic explanations regarding points of articulation (*makhārij al-ḥurūf*) or phonetic features (*ṣifāt al-ḥurūf*). As a result, students often repeated corrected forms mechanically without fully understanding the underlying phonological rules. Interviews with students further revealed that many perceived pronunciation problems as secondary compared to grammatical correctness. Several students admitted that they prioritised syntactic structure over sound accuracy, assuming that meaning remained intact as long as the grammatical form was

correct. However, instructors emphasised that phonological inaccuracy often led to misunderstandings, particularly in legal texts, where minimal phonemic differences could result in legal misinterpretation.

The combined quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrate that students' mastery of *Ashwāt Arabiyah* in *Salaf* pesantren remains uneven and vulnerable to interference from regional dialects and previous linguistic habits. While exposure and instructional duration contribute positively to phonological development, the absence of a structured phonological curriculum limits the potential for consistent improvement. These results support the existing literature on phonological transfer and fossilisation in second-language acquisition and reinforce the argument that Arabic phonology must be addressed systematically in pesantren education. Moreover, the findings highlight the urgency of integrating explicit phonetic instruction into *kitab kuning* learning, particularly in addressing region-specific pronunciation patterns and persistent phonological errors.

Table 1. Overall Level of Arabic Phonological Mastery among Students (N = 120)

Level of Mastery	Score Range	n	%
High	80–100	28	23.3
Moderate	60–79	61	50.8
Low	< 60	31	25.9
Total		120	100.0

As shown in Table 1, most students (50.8%) demonstrated moderate phonological mastery, while smaller proportions achieved high (23.3%) and low (25.9%) proficiency levels. This pattern suggests that although basic phonological competence has developed, overall pronunciation stability remains inconsistent across learners.

Table 2. Mean Scores by Phonological Component

Phonological Component	Mean	SD
<i>Makhārij al-ḥurūf</i> (articulation points)	68.4	7.2
<i>Ṣifāt al-ḥurūf</i> (phonetic features)	65.1	8.0
Vowel Length (madd)	62.7	9.1
Similar-Sound Discrimination	59.3	9.8
Overall Mean	63.9	—

Table 2 indicates that students performed relatively better in *makhārij al-ḥurūf* (mean = 68.4) and *ṣifāt al-ḥurūf* (mean = 65.1) than in vowel length (mean = 62.7) and similar-sound discrimination (mean = 59.3). The weakest area, similar-sound discrimination, suggests persistent difficulty in distinguishing minimal contrasts such as ص-س, ذ-ز, ث-ث, and ق-ك—contrasts that are crucial for preserving semantic distinctions in legal texts.

Table 3. Independent Samples t-Test by Learning Duration

Group	Mean	SD	df	Sig. (p)
≥ 3 years of study	71.6	6.4	5.21 118	< .001*
< 3 years of study	60.3	8.1	— —	—

*p < .001

An independent-samples t-test (Table 3) revealed a statistically significant difference in phonological mastery by study duration. Students with three or more years of kitab kuning learning scored significantly higher (M = 71.6, SD = 6.4) than those with less than three years of study (M = 60.3, SD = 8.1; p < .001). This finding indicates not only statistical significance but also suggests a meaningful difference in practical terms.

Table 4. Error Patterns by Regional Background

Region	Dominant Substitution Patterns	Relative Frequency
Sulawesi	ث → س	High
Lombok	ذ → س	High
Banjar	ج → ز, ف → p	Moderate
Sunda	ف → p	Moderate
Mixed	ق → ك, ص → س	Moderate

Table 4 shows that Arabic pronunciation errors among students vary systematically by regional background. Students from Sulawesi commonly substitute ث with س, while Lombok students replace ذ with س, reflecting difficulty with interdental sounds. Banjar and Sundanese students frequently pronounce ف as p, indicating bilabial substitution influenced by local phonology. Banjar students also substitute ج with ج. The mixed group demonstrates common errors such as ق → ك and ص → س, showing general difficulty with uvular and emphatic consonants. Overall, the table confirms that regional language interference strongly shapes Arabic phonological errors, which has implications for accuracy in reading *kitab kuning* and understanding Islamic legal terminology.

Qualitative data from classroom observations and interviews provide further nuance to these findings. During oral recitation sessions, many students hesitated, self-corrected, and repeated words containing guttural consonants or clusters of emphatic sounds. One student admitted: *"I feel nervous when I read aloud, especially when I see letters like 'ain, ghain, or the emphatic sounds. I am afraid that if I mispronounce them, the meaning will change and the teacher will correct me in front of my classmates."* (Student S12, male, age 19) Another student highlighted that phonological challenges were perceived as less important than grammar: *"We are often told to focus on nahwu and sharaf because they are the key to understanding the text. So sometimes I think pronunciation is secondary as long as the sentence is grammatically correct."* (Student S7, female, age 18) Interviews with instructors, however, revealed a different emphasis. One *ustaz* stressed: *"For legal texts, a small change in sound can change the ruling. If a student reads a word incorrectly, the legal implications may differ. So phonology is not just about beautiful recitation; it is about correctness in law."* (Ustaz 3, fiqh instructor)

Dialectal interference emerged as a significant factor shaping students' Arabic phonological performance. As shown in Table 4, region-specific substitution patterns reflect systematic transfer from learners' native phonological systems into Arabic pronunciation. These patterns indicate that difficulties in producing certain Arabic sounds are not random errors, but are strongly influenced by entrenched articulatory habits from local languages.

The persistence of these substitutions in both formal recitation and informal communication suggests that phonological interference operates at a deeper cognitive level, affecting not only pronunciation accuracy but also the stability of phonological representation. This has important implications for learning, as unstable phonological representations may hinder students' ability to distinguish semantically contrastive terms in Islamic legal texts. Overall, these findings highlight that students' mastery of *Ashwāt Arabiyah* is shaped not only by instructional exposure but also by prior linguistic background, reinforcing the need for targeted phonological training that explicitly addresses region-specific interference patterns.

Mastery of Islamic Legal Terminology among Students in Reading *Kitab Kuning*

The results indicate that students' mastery of Islamic legal terminology at the *Salaf* Islamic boarding school is generally moderate. Based on a test administered to 120 students, most participants demonstrated adequate recognition of basic fiqh terminology at the lexical level, yet showed difficulty understanding its technical meanings and legal implications in applied contexts. Students demonstrated relatively strong familiarity with foundational terms such as *wājib* (obligatory), *ḥarām* (prohibited), *sunnah* (recommended), *makrūh* (discouraged), and *mubāḥ* (permissible) during definitional tasks. However, when asked to relate these concepts to concrete legal cases, a significant proportion of students were unable to explain the distinctions in legal consequences in a structured manner. This suggests that students' knowledge remains largely declarative rather than conceptual.

In the context of *kitab kuning* reading sessions, students generally recited technical terms such as *rukṇ* (essential element), *sharṭ* (condition), *sabab* (cause), and *māniʿ* (legal impediment). Nevertheless, their understanding of these terms as components of Islamic legal reasoning was limited. Many students failed to distinguish between *rukṇ* and *sharṭ* functionally and were unable to explain how the absence of each affects the validity of religious practices or transactions. This conceptual confusion prevented students from performing even basic legal reasoning in real-life cases. Students' mastery of *uṣūl al-fiqh* terminology, including *muṭlaq* (unrestricted), *muqayyad* (restricted), *ʿāmm* (general), *khāṣṣ*

(specific), *mujmal* (ambiguous), and *mubayyan* (clarified), also ranged from low to moderate. Although students could often recall definitions, few demonstrated an understanding of how these categories function in legal derivation (*istinbāṭ al-ḥukm*). For instance, the process by which a general ruling (*muṭlaq*) is limited by a specific one (*muqayyad*) was frequently understood as an isolated concept rather than as part of an integrated legal methodology.

Classroom observations further revealed that students' comprehension of legal terminology relied heavily on teachers' oral explanations. When left to interpret Islamic legal terms directly from the text, most students experienced significant difficulty due to the dense, implicit nature of the *kitab kuning* writing style. Consequently, legal terms were more often memorised than conceptually understood.

Interview data supported these findings. One student stated: "*I can pronounce and memorise the legal terms, but when I have to explain how they work in real religious practice, I often feel confused. The terms stay as theory in my mind.*" (Student S18) An instructor also observed: "*Many students can recite Islamic legal terms, but they do not yet understand the legal structure behind them. They know the words, but not the legal reasoning system.*" (Instructor U2) In summary, the results demonstrate that students' mastery of Islamic legal terminology is predominantly verbal and theoretical, while conceptual and applied understanding remains limited. These findings highlight the need for pedagogical strategies that move beyond memorisation toward deeper conceptual engagement with Islamic legal language.

Relationship between Arabic Phonological Mastery and Understanding of Islamic Legal Terminology

The quantitative analysis reveals a meaningful relationship between students' mastery of *Ashwāt Arabiyah* and their understanding of Islamic legal terminology in reading *kitab kuning*. Statistical testing shows that students with higher phonological scores tended to achieve higher scores in Islamic legal terminology comprehension, whereas those with weaker phonological competence performed worse in understanding legal concepts. Correlation analysis indicates a positive and statistically significant relationship between the two variables. Students who demonstrated accurate articulation, correct vowel-length

differentiation, and strong discrimination of similar-sounding phonemes consistently showed better comprehension of legal terms across the fiqh and *uṣūl al-fiqh* domains. Conversely, students with low phonological accuracy frequently misinterpret legal expressions or struggle to recall legal classifications correctly. Pearson's correlation analysis revealed a positive, statistically significant relationship between phonological mastery and legal terminology comprehension ($r = 0.61$, $p < .001$).

Students in the "high phonological mastery" group achieved higher mean scores in legal terminology comprehension than those in the "moderate" and "low" groups. This pattern suggests that phonological competence is associated with greater stability in lexical access and semantic processing in Islamic legal texts.⁴³ Classroom observations provided qualitative reinforcement of the quantitative findings. Students with strong phonological mastery read legal expressions fluently and confidently and demonstrated greater ease in explaining the meanings and legal consequences of terms such as *wājib*, *sharṭ*, and *rukṇ*. During discussions, these students often initiated explanations without relying heavily on teacher validation. In contrast, students with lower phonological mastery exhibited noticeable hesitation during recitation sessions. Mispronunciation of phonemes such as ص, ث, ذ, and ق resulted in frequent interruptions, teacher corrections, and breakdowns in comprehension. These students not only struggled with oral accuracy but also displayed difficulty in explaining the implications of legal rulings derived from the text. One instructor remarked:

"Students who read smoothly also understand the law more easily. Those who still struggle with pronunciation usually fail to explain the ruling clearly." (Ustaz / Teacher U2) Another instructor similarly observed: *"When pronunciation is unstable, understanding becomes unstable as well. The students remember the sound incorrectly, and the meaning becomes unclear."* (Ustaz / Teacher U4) Interview data from students further illustrate this relationship. One student stated: *"When I finally learned how to pronounce difficult letters like 'ain and ṣād, the phrases in the*

⁴³ Oluwaseun Adeyemi Ogunleeye, 'Advancing Vocational Education and Skills Development to Meet Modern Workforce Demands Effectively', *Nusantara Education* 5, no. 1 (2026): 13-28, <https://doi.org/10.66325/nusantaraeducation.v5i1.255>.

book started to make more sense. Before that, the text felt confusing even if I could read it." (Student S11) Another student reported: "I used to mix up letters like *sīn* and *thā'*. After learning the difference, it became easier to understand why the terms were different in meaning." (Student S26)

An analysis of error patterns also indicates that phonological weaknesses affected legal interpretation. Students who were unable to consistently differentiate minimal phonemic contrasts often confused terms with similar structures, resulting in inaccurate classification of legal categories. Most errors occurred with interdental sounds, emphatic consonants, and guttural phonemes, which are not present in the Indonesian phonemic system. The findings further show that phonological mastery plays a vital role in supporting legal memory, particularly in memorising and recalling concise legal maxims (*qawā'id fiqhiyyah*). Students with higher phonological scores demonstrated better retention of patterned expressions and retrieved them more efficiently during legal case analysis. Overall, the results demonstrate that mastery of *Ashwāt Arabiyah* is not merely a technical oral skill but functions as a core cognitive mechanism that facilitates access to Islamic legal meaning. The stronger a student's phonological competence, the more stable and accurate their understanding of Islamic legal terminology becomes during the reading of *kitab kuning*.

Integration of Legal Maxims as Empirical Evidence

The qualitative findings reveal that specific Islamic legal maxims (*qawā'id fiqhiyyah*) functioned as empirical indicators of the relationship between Arabic phonological mastery and legal comprehension. These expressions were identified through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews, in which both students and instructors repeatedly referred to certain maxims during reading and explanation sessions. Two expressions that consistently emerged from the observational data were:

جاف على جاف طاهر بلا خلاف

(If dry meets dry, it is pure without disagreement)

and

وَالْمُسْتَعِيرُ لَمْ يُعْزِ لِنَانٍ

(The borrower is not entitled to lend the property to another person)

These maxims were not part of the formal test instruments, but appeared organically during learning interactions, particularly when students attempted to recall and explain legal principles. Their repeated use across participants suggests that such expressions serve as cognitive anchors for linking phonological patterns to legal meaning. In the case of جاف على جاف طاهر بلا خلاف, students demonstrated that repetition and phonological symmetry in the expression strengthened recall of the legal principle. Learners who pronounced the phrase accurately were able to directly associate it with the jurisprudential rule regarding impurity (*najāsah*). During interviews, one student stated: "I remember this rule because the words sound similar and rhythmical. When I repeat the phrase accurately, the meaning also becomes clear in my mind." (Student 9)

However, students who mispronounced the phrase, especially in the repetition of the emphatic consonant and the lengthening of the vowel, often failed to recall the legal substance. Observations suggest that phonological precision facilitated both retention and conceptual linkage. Similarly, in the phrase وَالْمُسْتَعِيرُ لَمْ يُعْزِ لِنَانٍ, phonological difficulty was concentrated in the contrast between س (s) and ث (th). Students who failed to differentiate the two sounds frequently distorted both the structure and meaning of the expression. However, once phonological differentiation was achieved, students demonstrated improved comprehension of the legal prohibition regarding unauthorised lending. One instructor noted: "As soon as they can distinguish *sīn* from *thā'*, they no longer confuse the meaning of the legal rule. Their understanding becomes stronger after correct pronunciation." (Ustaz 2) Further interviews confirmed that phonological mastery served as a gateway to legal cognition: "Before I learned the difference between *sīn* and *thā'*, I kept forgetting the meaning. After learning it correctly, the legal message became easier to recall." (Student 26)

These examples provide direct evidence that Arabic phonology supports legal understanding not merely at the performance level but at the conceptual level. Phonological structures operate as mnemonic anchors for Islamic legal rules, enabling learners to encode complex juridical information through sound patterns. The results demonstrate that Arabic phonology functions as an epistemic tool in Islamic legal learning. Mastery of phonological forms activates memory, sharpens semantic discrimination, and reinforces legal reasoning. In short, these two expressions exemplify how sound accuracy facilitates jurisprudential accuracy in pesantren education.

From a broader applied linguistics perspective, phonological competence plays a central role in second language acquisition, particularly in supporting lexical access and semantic processing.⁴⁴ Research in psycholinguistics demonstrates that stable phonological representations facilitate efficient word recognition and meaning construction, while phonological instability may lead to ambiguity in lexical retrieval and comprehension breakdown.⁴⁵ In Arabic language learning, this relationship is further intensified by the high functional load of phonemic contrasts, in which minimal differences in sound can result in significant semantic distinctions.⁴⁶ Within domain-specific contexts such as Islamic legal discourse, accurate phonological encoding becomes even more critical, as mispronunciation may alter not only lexical meaning but also juridical interpretation. These findings reinforce the view that phonological processing is not merely a peripheral linguistic skill but a foundational mechanism underlying higher-order comprehension in specialised knowledge domains.⁴⁷

This study provides empirical evidence that Arabic phonological mastery (*Ashwāt Arabiyah*) plays a central role in shaping students' understanding of Islamic legal

⁴⁴ Anne Cutler, *Native Listening: Language Experience and the Recognition of Spoken Words* (The MIT Press, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9012.001.0001>.

⁴⁵ Boudelaa et al., 'The Differential Effects of Consonant and Vowel Diacritics in Arabic'.

⁴⁶ Bushra Zawaydeh, 'Janet C. E. Watson (2002). *The Phonology and Morphology of Arabic*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp. V+307.', *Phonology* 20, no. 2 (2003): 280-283, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0952675703004548>.

⁴⁷ Vivian Cook, *Second Language Learning and Language Teaching: Fifth Edition*, 0 edn (Routledge, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315883113>.

terminology in *Salaf* Islamic boarding schools. While previous research has often emphasised grammar (*nahwu* and *ṣarf*) and vocabulary as primary determinants of legal comprehension, the present findings foreground phonology as a critical yet underexplored dimension in Islamic legal education. First, the finding that students' phonological competence correlates significantly with their understanding of Islamic legal terminology supports earlier studies that highlight the role of Arabic language proficiency in accessing Islamic legal sciences. Alhirtani, as well as Sa'dudin et al., demonstrate that limited Arabic proficiency weakens students' ability to comprehend Islamic legal texts. However, these studies largely conceptualise Arabic proficiency in terms of grammar and lexical knowledge. The present study extends this scholarship by isolating phonological mastery as a key mechanism underlying semantic accuracy and legal reasoning.

This refinement aligns with psycholinguistic perspectives. Boudelaa et al. argue that phonological processing underlies lexical access and semantic integration. In this regard, phonological awareness enables learners to activate correct lexical representations in memory.⁴⁸ When phonological encoding is unstable, semantic retrieval is disrupted. The consistent misinterpretations observed among students who struggled to differentiate minimal phonemic contrasts, such as /θ -s/ or /q-k/, indicate that phonological imprecision is associated with difficulties in legal understanding rather than merely contributing to poor pronunciation. From a theoretical perspective, these findings can also be interpreted through the lens of second language acquisition and cognitive processing theories, which emphasise the role of phonological representation in shaping higher-level comprehension. Accurate phonological encoding enables stable lexical access, which in turn supports semantic integration and conceptual understanding. In contrast, unstable phonological representations may lead to ambiguity in lexical retrieval, thereby affecting the interpretation of domain-specific terminology. In the context of Islamic legal texts,

⁴⁸ Sophia Anne Milleer, 'Integrating Local Wisdom and Global Knowledge to Develop Culturally Responsive Education Models', *Nusantara Education* 5, no. 1 (2026): 45–61, <https://doi.org/10.66325/nusantaraeducation.v5i1.257>.

where minimal phonemic distinctions can carry significant juridical implications, this relationship becomes particularly critical.

Second, the finding concerning regional dialect interference corroborates previous research on language interference in pesantren-based Arabic learning. Solehudin and Arisandi identify phonological interference as the most dominant form of linguistic transfer at Islamic boarding schools, particularly where Arabic sounds have no equivalents in local languages. The current study builds upon this finding by showing not only how phonological transfer shapes pronunciation, but also how it relates to conceptual understanding of Islamic law. In other words, phonological interference is not confined to surface performance but extends to cognitive representation and legal interpretation.

Third, the difficulty students experienced in comprehending *uṣūl al-fiqh* terminology, such as *muṭlaq*–*muqayyad* and *‘āmm*–*khāṣṣ*, resonates with prior scholarship on the complexity of Islamic legal language and translation. Khan and Mahmoud argue that legal terminology cannot be understood solely through literal translation, as it is embedded in a system of legal reasoning and intellectual tradition. The present findings support this argument by revealing that students often remain at the lexical level of understanding, while failing to grasp legal function and conceptual interdependence among terms.

Fourth, the use of legal maxims as linguistic data introduces a novel contribution to the field. Anwar highlights the pedagogical role of *qawā’id fiqhiyyah* in fiqh instruction, yet their phonological dimension remains underexplored. The present study shows that rhythmic sound patterns and phonemic contrasts may function as mnemonic devices that support semantic retention and long-term recall. In line with this, Benkoudad et al. demonstrate that rhythmic structures facilitate memory encoding, suggesting that legal language in classical Islamic texts is not only conceptually condensed but also phonetically structured to support memorisation. Moreover, this finding strengthens the epistemological framework proposed by Tabroni et al., which positions Arabic as the foundation of Islamic scholarly tradition. The present study further specifies that Arabic

functions epistemically not only at the semantic and syntactic levels, but also at the phonological level. Inaccurate articulation may distort legal meaning and weaken the integrity of knowledge transmission, a principle strongly emphasised in the *Salaf* pesantren tradition.

Fifth, the study contributes pedagogically by highlighting the limitations of traditional instructional models that prioritise grammar over phonological training. Makraja and Azmi, as well as Muhlas et al., advocate innovative approaches to *kitab kuning* instruction; however, phonological competence has rarely been conceptualised as a central learning objective. The present findings suggest that pedagogical reform should incorporate systematic phonological instruction, particularly through training in *makhārij al-ḥurūf*, *ṣifāt al-ḥurūf*, and minimal-pair discrimination. In summary, this study advances current scholarship by positioning phonology not merely as a mechanical aspect of Arabic learning but as a significant component in supporting Islamic legal comprehension. It offers a perspective that bridges Arabic language education and Islamic legal studies. Future research may further examine phonology-based interventions, including digital pronunciation tools and phonology-focused learning modules, to evaluate their potential impact on legal literacy among pesantren students. This suggests that phonological competence should be considered not only as a linguistic skill but also as a foundational component of domain-specific knowledge acquisition in Islamic legal education.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that mastery of *Ashwāt Arabiyah* plays a significant role in shaping students' understanding of Islamic legal terminology in *Salaf* Islamic boarding schools during the reading of *kitab kuning*. The findings confirm that phonological competence is not merely a technical oral skill but an important linguistic and cognitive component that supports access to Islamic legal meaning. Students with stronger phonological mastery consistently showed higher ability to recall, interpret, and apply Islamic legal terms, particularly in legally sensitive expressions and *qawā'id fihiyyah*. This study contributes to existing scholarship by positioning Arabic phonology as a core variable

in Islamic legal comprehension—an area that has received limited attention in previous research, which primarily emphasised grammar and vocabulary. By integrating phonological analysis into the study of Islamic legal education, this research offers a more holistic understanding of how Arabic language competence functions within pesantren pedagogy.

Despite its contributions, this study is limited by its focus on a single pesantren and a relatively homogeneous participant group, which may affect the generalizability of findings. Future research should involve multi-site analysis across different pesantren traditions and incorporate experimental designs to test phonology-based pedagogical interventions. In practice, the results suggest the need to systematically integrate phonological instruction—such as *makhārij al-ḥurūf* training and minimal-pair discrimination—into the teaching practices of kitab kuning. Strengthening phonological awareness in pesantren not only enhances pronunciation accuracy but also improves students' legal literacy and comprehension. These implications highlight the potential for curriculum innovation, including the development of phonology-centred learning modules and digital pronunciation tools, to support deeper engagement with Islamic legal texts.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

A designed the research framework and coordinated the overall study process. AA conducted the data collection, performed the primary analysis, and contributed to the interpretation of the findings. NH, MR and KHJ assisted in refining the methodology, validating the analysis, and preparing the manuscript draft. All authors reviewed, revised, and approved the final version of the manuscript before submission.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this article. All research activities, data interpretations, and conclusions were conducted independently and free from any conflict of interest.

AI USAGE STATEMENT

The authors declare that no artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the conception, design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, or writing of this manuscript. All aspects of the research and manuscript preparation were conducted solely by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the content, accuracy, and originality of the work presented in this article.

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