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An Analysis of the Challenges Faced by Non-Pesantren Students of the Arabic Language Education Program in Mastering *Maharah Kalam*

Farhan Shah Putra¹, Fatma Yulia²

^{1,2} Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia.

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Corresponding Author:
 Farhan Shah Putra, UIN Sumatera
 Utara, Email:
farhan0302223040@uinsu.ac.id

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Abstract

This study analyzes the difficulties faced by students in the Arabic Language Education (PBA) program, enrolled in 2022, who do not come from a *pesantren* background in mastering *maharah kalam* at UIN North Sumatra in Medan. The study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive research design. Data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation, then analyzed using the Miles and Huberman model. The results indicate that several factors influence students' mastery of spoken Arabic, including intrinsic factors such as low motivation to learn Arabic, a lack of confidence when speaking, limited vocabulary, and weak command of Arabic grammar (*nahwu*) and morphology (*sharaf*). Extrinsic factors include the appropriateness of instructors' teaching methods, the intensity of speaking practice, peer support, and the language environment (*bi'ah lughawiyah*). In addition, low self-confidence, fear of making mistakes, the lack of an established Arabic-speaking environment (*bi'ah lughawiyah*), limited opportunities for speaking practice, teaching methods that are not sufficiently communicative, a lack of variety in Arabic-language learning media, and a scarcity of practice opportunities also serve as inhibiting factors. Efforts made by students to overcome these difficulties include increasing speaking practice, memorizing vocabulary, utilizing digital learning media, and practicing with friends. This study is expected to serve as a basis for evaluation by faculty members and the PBA Study Program in improving the effectiveness of teaching the subject of *maharah kalam*.

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Introduction

The role of Arabic in Islamic higher education is crucial, given its status as the language of the Qur'an and Hadith and as the primary medium for engaging with both classical and contemporary Islamic scholarship. As a result, students enrolled in the Arabic Language Education (Pendidikan Bahasa Arab/PBA) program are expected to achieve proficiency in four fundamental language skills (*maharah al-lughah*): listening (*istima'*), speaking (*kalam*), reading (*qira'ah*), and writing (*kitabah*). These skills are interrelated, and mastery of each reflects students' overall competence in Arabic (Rosada, 2017). Among these skills, *Maharah al-Kalam* holds particular importance, as it denotes learners' ability to effectively communicate ideas, opinions, and information orally, utilizing

appropriate vocabulary (*mufradāt*), correct grammatical structures (*nahwu* and *ṣarf*), precise pronunciation (*makhrāj*), and fluent speech. Consequently, the mastery of speaking skills cannot be attained through theoretical instruction alone but requires sustained communicative practice within a supportive learning environment (Indriana & Pd, 2020).

The Arabic Language Education Program at Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara (UINSU) admits students from diverse educational backgrounds. Some students graduated from Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), where Arabic is intensively taught and practiced in daily communication, while others graduated from public senior high schools, vocational schools, or non-boarding madrasahs, where opportunities to learn and use Arabic communicatively are relatively limited. These differences in educational experiences contribute to disparities in students' initial Arabic proficiency, particularly in speaking skills (Hasibuan et al., 2025).

Prior to conducting this study, the researcher carried out a preliminary observation during the *Mahārah al-Kalām* course involving students from the 2022 cohort who came from non-pesantren backgrounds. The preliminary observation revealed that most students experienced considerable difficulty when required to express ideas orally in Arabic. The most frequently observed problems included limited vocabulary, incorrect application of *nahwu* and *ṣarf* rules in sentence construction, inaccurate pronunciation of several Arabic sounds at their *makhrāj*, frequent pauses while speaking, and code-switching from Arabic to Indonesian during classroom interaction. In addition, many students appeared hesitant, reluctant to speak voluntarily, and lacked confidence because they were afraid of making grammatical or pronunciation mistakes. These preliminary findings indicate that students' speaking difficulties are influenced not only by linguistic competence but also by psychological and environmental factors that hinder their active participation in Arabic communication.

Learning difficulties in *Mahārah al-Kalām* are influenced by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Intrinsic factors include motivation to learn, self-confidence, vocabulary mastery, and mastery of *nahwu* and *ṣarf*. Students with strong motivation and adequate linguistic competence generally demonstrate greater confidence and participate more actively in speaking activities. Conversely, students with limited vocabulary, insufficient grammatical knowledge, low motivation, and poor self-confidence tend to experience greater difficulty expressing ideas orally. Meanwhile, extrinsic factors include teaching methods, opportunities for speaking practice, peer support, and the availability of an Arabic-speaking environment (*bi'ah lughawīyyah*). These external conditions determine the frequency and quality of students' exposure to Arabic communication, thereby influencing the development of their speaking proficiency (Lubis et al., 2022).

Based on these considerations, this study conceptualizes students' speaking difficulties as the result of interactions between intrinsic and extrinsic factors rather than being caused by a single variable. These interconnected factors are explored through a descriptive qualitative approach, using classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentation to develop a comprehensive understanding of students' learning experiences and the challenges they face in mastering *Mahārah al-Kalām*.

Several previous studies have investigated *Mahārah al-Kalām* from different perspectives. Reported that poor Arabic speaking proficiency was primarily caused by limited vocabulary mastery and the lack of communicative teaching methods in Islamic boarding schools. Likewise, Yunita & Pebrian, (2020) demonstrated that communicative learning through structured *muhādatsah* activities and the development of *bi'ah lughawīyyah* significantly improved students' speaking skills and self-confidence. Lubis et al. (2022) also found that communicative learning strategies, combined with

intensive Arabic exposure, contributed positively to improvements in students' oral communication skills.

Despite these valuable findings, previous studies mainly focused on improving speaking skills through instructional strategies implemented in pesantren or madrasah environments, where students are already familiar with Arabic learning traditions and benefit from supportive language environments. Consequently, these studies paid limited attention to how differences in educational background influence students' speaking difficulties, particularly among university students who entered Arabic Language Education programs without prior pesantren experience. Furthermore, few studies have simultaneously examined the interaction between intrinsic factors (motivation, vocabulary mastery, grammatical competence, and self-confidence) and extrinsic factors (teaching methods, peer support, speaking opportunities, and *bi'ah lughawiyah*) in explaining students' difficulties in mastering *Mahārah al-Kalām*.

Accordingly, this study addresses this research gap by focusing specifically on non-pesantren students enrolled in the 2022 cohort of the Arabic Language Education Program at UIN Sumatera Utara. Rather than evaluating the effectiveness of a particular instructional method, this study seeks to identify the forms of speaking difficulties these students experience, analyze the intrinsic and extrinsic factors contributing to those difficulties, and describe the strategies students employ to overcome them. The findings are expected to contribute both theoretically and practically to the development of more inclusive and communicative Arabic language instruction for university students with diverse educational backgrounds.

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach using a descriptive research design. A qualitative approach was selected because the objective of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the difficulties non-pesantren students experience in mastering *Mahārah al-Kalām*, including the factors contributing to these difficulties and the strategies they employ to overcome them. Through this approach, the researcher explored participants' experiences, perceptions, and learning processes in their natural educational setting (Mardianto et al, 2022).

The research was conducted in the Arabic Language Education (PBA) Study Program at the Faculty of Tarbiyah and Teacher Training, Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara (UINSU) Medan. Data collection was carried out from March to May 2026 during the implementation of the *Mahārah al-Kalām* course. Classroom observations were conducted throughout six learning meetings, while interviews and documentation were undertaken after the observation stage to enable data confirmation and triangulation.

The participants were selected through purposive sampling because not all students possessed characteristics relevant to the study's objectives. The research involved 15 students from the 2022 cohort who met the following inclusion criteria: (1) they graduated from non-pesantren educational institutions, including senior high schools (SMA), vocational high schools (SMK), or non-boarding madrasahs; (2) they were officially enrolled in the *Mahārah al-Kalām* course; (3) they demonstrated difficulties in Arabic speaking based on preliminary classroom observations conducted by the researcher, such as limited vocabulary, inaccurate sentence construction according to *nahwu* and *ṣarf* rules, pronunciation errors (*makhruj*), low speaking fluency, and reluctance to participate actively in Arabic conversations; and (4) they were willing to participate voluntarily in interviews and classroom observations. To strengthen the credibility of the data, the researcher also interviewed a lecturer responsible for teaching *Mahārah al-Kalām* as a key informant.

The study used three data collection techniques: observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Each technique was supported by specific research instruments developed according to the conceptual indicators of *Mahārah al-Kalām* presented in the literature review.

The observation instrument consisted of an observation guide designed to examine students' speaking performance during classroom learning. The observed indicators included: (1) vocabulary mastery (*mufradāt*), (2) grammatical accuracy (*nahwu* and *ṣarf*), (3) pronunciation accuracy (*makhraj al-ḥurūf*), (4) fluency in speaking, (5) confidence in expressing ideas orally, and (6) students' participation during Arabic communication activities.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview protocol consisting of open-ended questions that explored: (1) students' previous Arabic learning experiences, (2) difficulties encountered while learning *Mahārah al-Kalām*, (3) intrinsic factors such as motivation, self-confidence, vocabulary mastery, and grammatical competence, (4) extrinsic factors including teaching methods, opportunities for speaking practice, peer support, and *bi'ah lughawīyyah*, and (5) strategies adopted by students to overcome their speaking difficulties. Interviews with the course lecturer focused on classroom learning practices, students' speaking performance, and instructional challenges encountered during the course. Documentation was employed to complement observational and interview data. The collected documents included students' speaking assessment records, photographs of learning activities, lesson plans, teaching materials, and institutional documents relevant to the implementation of *Mahārah al-Kalām* instruction.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, this study employed both source triangulation and methodological triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from students with data provided by the *Mahārah al-Kalām* lecturer, classroom observations, and supporting documents. Methodological triangulation was implemented by cross-checking findings from observations, interviews, and documentation. Data obtained from one technique were continuously compared with evidence generated from the other techniques until consistent findings were achieved, thereby enhancing the credibility and dependability of the research findings (Ilyas & Syahid, 2018).

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), consisting of three interconnected stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. During data condensation, interview transcripts, observation notes, and documentation were organized, coded, and categorized according to the research focus.

This study followed ethical principles for social science research involving human participants. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents before data collection. Respondents were informed about the study objectives, procedures, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. The participants were adult students, and the study posed minimal risk. Data were collected through a self-administered questionnaire on entrepreneurship learning, self-efficacy, spiritual motivation, and entrepreneurial intention. No personally identifiable information was collected. All responses were anonymized and analyzed in aggregate to protect participants' privacy and confidentiality. The authors declare no conflicts of interest. The study complied with applicable institutional guidelines and ethical standards for research involving human participants.

Findings

Mahārah al-Kalām

In Arabic, the term for the skill of *mahārah* (المهارة). Etymologically, the word *mahārah* comes from the root words مَهَرَ - يَمْهَرُ - مَهَارَةً, which mean skill, competence, dexterity, cleverness, expertise, and skill in performing a task. The *isim fā'il* form is مَاهِرٌ (*māhir*), which refers to someone who possesses ability, competence, or expertise in a particular field. Thus, *mahārah* can be understood as a person's ability to carry out an activity skillfully and competently (Mufidah Abbas et al., 2025).

Etymologically, the word "kalām" (الكلام) comes from Arabic, meaning speech, utterance, or speech. In usage, "kalām" refers to any form of verbal expression used to convey intentions, ideas, or information to others. Terminologically, "kalām" refers to a person's ability to express thoughts, ideas, feelings, and desires through spoken language with correct, fluent pronunciation and in accordance with linguistic rules (Jaroyatun Ni'mah & Nasiruddin, 2020).

Mahārah al-Kalām is one of the four language skills that must be mastered in Arabic language learning, in addition to listening (*istimā'*), reading (*qira'ah*), and writing (*kitabah*). This skill is classified as a productive skill because it requires the ability to express ideas, opinions, experiences, and information orally in proper Arabic. Speaking ability is an indicator of success in learning Arabic because, through speaking activities, a person can demonstrate their mastery of vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and the ability to communicate effectively (Mustofa, 2021).

Among these three terms, *al-kalām* has the broadest scope. In learning Arabic, *mahārah al-kalām* is understood as students' ability to convey ideas, concepts, opinions, feelings, and information orally in good, correct Arabic. This ability requires mastery of linguistic aspects, such as pronunciation (*makhraj*), vocabulary (*mufradāt*), language structure (*tarākīb*), as well as accuracy in applying linguistic rules. Therefore, *mahārah al-kalām* is recognized as one of the four basic language skills that students must master. Its scope is not limited to conversation activities but also includes discussions, presentations, storytelling, responding, expressing opinions, and other forms of oral communication (Hurin'in, 2021).

Meanwhile, *al-muhādatsah* is part of *mahārah al-kalām*, which specifically refers to reciprocal conversational activities between two or more people. In Arabic language learning, *muhādatsah* is used to help students become accustomed to communicating in Arabic in everyday situations. This activity focuses on developing fluency, vocabulary accuracy, the ability to respond spontaneously, and courage in interacting with others. Thus, *muhādatsah* can be understood as a practice that develops communicative speaking skills (Alpinah, 2020).

Al-ḥiwār is a dialogue conducted by two or more people in which they exchange ideas, opinions, and information on a particular topic. In Arabic language learning, *ḥiwār* is generally presented as dialogue texts designed as teaching materials. Students first study the content of the dialogue, then practice it with friends before developing it into broader communication situations. Therefore, *ḥiwār* emphasizes directed, structured dialogue, while *muhādatsah* provides greater space for students to engage in natural, spontaneous conversations suited to the communication context at hand (Khair, 2018).

In Arabic language learning, *Mahārah al-Kalām* plays a very important role, as it serves to develop students' oral communication skills. These skills cannot be acquired solely through theoretical knowledge but require continuous practice. The more often a person uses Arabic in communication, the better their speaking ability becomes. Therefore, the learning process should

be designed using a communicative approach that provides students with opportunities to engage in dialogue, participate in discussions, express their opinions, and give presentations in Arabic (Nasution, 2015).

Success in mastering *Mahārah al-Kalām* depends on several key factors: vocabulary (*mufradāt*), understanding the rules of *nahwu* and *ṣarf*, accurate pronunciation (*makbrāḥ*), fluency, and the confidence to express one's opinions. These elements are interrelated, so a weakness in any one aspect will affect one's overall speaking ability.

Difficulties in learning Arabic are situations in which students encounter obstacles to achieving learning objectives, whether linguistic or non-linguistic. In the context of *Mahārah al-Kalām*, these difficulties can range from limited vocabulary, errors in sentence structure, and difficulty pronouncing Arabic sounds to an inability to express ideas fluently. Learning difficulties are conditions that prevent students from achieving optimal learning outcomes due to various factors originating from within or outside themselves.

Intrinsic factors include low motivation to learn Arabic, a lack of confidence when speaking, limited vocabulary, and a weak command of grammar and morphology. Students with high motivation tend to be more proactive in seeking opportunities to practice, so their speaking skills develop more quickly. Conversely, students who lack confidence or fear making mistakes often prefer to remain silent, thereby limiting their opportunities to improve their speaking skills. Psychological factors, such as language anxiety, often cause students to be reluctant to use Arabic in the learning process (Ikmal & Maskan, n.d.).

In addition to intrinsic factors, extrinsic factors also significantly impact the success of learning *Mahārah al-Kalām*. These factors include the teaching methods used by instructors, the intensity of speaking practice, the availability of learning materials, peer support, and the language environment (*bi'ah lughawīyyah*). A learning environment that encourages the use of Arabic will motivate students to practice more frequently, thereby improving their communication skills. Conversely, if Arabic is used only during lectures, students' opportunities to practice the language become limited, resulting in slower progress in their speaking skills.

Based on this theory, the difficulties faced by students from non-pesantren backgrounds in mastering *Mahārah al-Kalām* are not only due to limited language proficiency but also influenced by their educational background, learning experiences, psychological state, and learning environment. Students from non-pesantren backgrounds generally have less experience learning Arabic than students from pesantren backgrounds. This situation means they require a longer adaptation period to master speaking skills. Therefore, learning strategies are needed to accommodate students' diverse backgrounds through a communicative approach, increased practice opportunities, and a learning environment that supports the active use of Arabic (Khoiriyah et al., 2022).

Factors That Contribute to Difficulties in *Maharah Kalam*

Based on observations, interviews, and documentation, most students who do not attend Islamic boarding schools face various obstacles in using spoken Arabic. These obstacles are influenced by two factors: intrinsic and extrinsic factors. During the learning process, the researcher observed that students tended to understand the material when the lecturer explained it in Indonesian. However, when asked to express their opinions or engage in dialogue in Arabic, most students showed hesitation, paused mid-sentence, or even switched to Indonesian.

The interview results show that nearly all informants reported they had never received intensive instruction in Arabic conversation while in high school. Most only learned the basics of

reading the Qur'an, some simple vocabulary, and a limited amount of *nahwu* and *sharaf rules*. One informant said: "I only really started learning Arabic when I entered college. In high school, we learned very little, so when the professor asked us to speak Arabic, I was often at a loss for words" (Yoga, 2026). Another informant said: "The hardest part is constructing sentences on the spot. I forget a lot of the vocabulary I've memorized when I have to speak" (Alya, 2026).

These findings indicate that educational background is one of the main causes of students' poor speaking skills, which is influenced by two factors, namely:

1. Intrinsic Factors

a. Low motivation to learn Arabic

Motivation to learn is one of the intrinsic factors that significantly determines a person's success in learning a language, including Arabic. Motivation serves as a driving force that directs, sustains, and enhances students' efforts in the learning process. Students with high motivation tend to participate more actively in class, are not afraid to ask questions, diligently memorize vocabulary, and are more confident in practicing their Arabic speaking skills. Conversely, low motivation causes students to be less enthusiastic about learning, less willing to practice speaking, and more prone to giving up when they encounter difficulties.

Among PBA students in the 2024 cohort from non-pesantren backgrounds, low motivation often stems from insufficient prior experience learning Arabic before entering college. They view Arabic as a difficult course because it requires mastery of vocabulary, grammar (*nahwu and sharaf*), and pronunciation—all of which differ from Indonesian. This perception can dampen their enthusiasm for learning, causing students to become passive listeners rather than actively participating in muḥādatsah or discussions in Arabic.

The results of Hanifah's (2019) study indicate that learning motivation plays a crucial role in inspiring students to achieve their Arabic language learning goals. Teachers and instructors, as motivators, need to create an engaging learning environment that encourages students to actively use Arabic throughout the learning process. If motivation to learn is low, student engagement in the learning process also decreases, resulting in suboptimal learning outcomes (Hanifah, 2019).

b. Lack of confidence when speaking

Self-confidence is one of the psychological factors that influence success in language learning, particularly in speaking skills (*Mahārah al-Kalām*). Self-confidence is an individual's belief in their ability to convey ideas, opinions, or information without excessive fear. In Arabic language learning, students who possess self-confidence tend to be more willing to speak, more actively participate in muḥādatsah activities, and are less afraid of making mistakes. Conversely, students with low self-confidence often choose to remain silent, avoid speaking in front of instructors or peers, and are reluctant to participate in conversation exercises.

Among PBA students in the 2024 cohort from non-pesantren backgrounds, low self-confidence is generally influenced by their limited experience with Arabic. They feel they have not yet mastered vocabulary (*mufradāt*), grammar (*nahwu and sharaf*), or pronunciation (*makhārij al-ḥurūf*), leading to concerns about making mistakes when speaking. These feelings lead to foreign language anxiety, which ultimately reduces students' confidence in using Arabic orally. As a result, opportunities to practice become increasingly scarce, hindering the development of their speaking skills.

These findings are consistent with the research by Saudah and Aziz (2025), which shows that one of the main challenges in learning *Mahārah al-Kalām* is students' low self-confidence. The study

found that many students are reluctant to speak because they fear making mistakes in pronunciation, sentence structure, or the application of *nahwu* and *sharaf* rules. This situation leads them to act more often as passive listeners rather than active speakers in learning activities (Saudah & Aziz, 2025).

c. Limited vocabulary

The initial findings indicate that a limited vocabulary is the most significant challenge. Most students reported understanding the topic of conversation but being unable to express themselves in Arabic because they lacked the appropriate vocabulary. During conversation practice, students often paused for a few seconds to recall the words they needed. Some students even mixed Indonesian into their conversations.

The instructor also explained that students who do not attend Islamic boarding schools generally have a much smaller vocabulary than those who do. This finding is consistent with research showing that limited vocabulary is a major factor hindering students' speaking skills (Hasibuan et al., 2025).

d. Weak command of *nahwu* and *sharaf*

One intrinsic factor contributing to non-pesantren students' struggle to master *Mahārah al-Kalām* is their weak command of *nahwu* (syntax) and *sharaf* (morphology). These two branches of study form the foundation for constructing correct Arabic sentences and thus significantly influence speaking ability. Students who do not yet understand the rules of *nahwu* and *sharaf* tend to have difficulty constructing sentences, determining word inflections (*taṣrīf*), identifying final vowel marks (*i'rab*), and adapting the use of verbs, nouns, and prepositions to conversational context.

Due to this weak command of grammar, students often feel hesitant when speaking for fear of making structural errors. This situation causes them to focus more on grammatical rules than on expressing their ideas spontaneously. As a result, communication becomes halting, conversations often stall midway, and some students even choose to remain silent rather than risk making a mistake. This demonstrates that speaking proficiency in Arabic requires not only a command of vocabulary but also an understanding of the grammatical system as the foundation for constructing correct utterances (Romadhon, 2025).

A study by Asiah, Zamroni, and Rijal (2022) explains that the science of *nahwu* is the foundation for mastering all Arabic language skills. Difficulty in understanding the rules of *nahwu* will impact students' ability to form correct sentences, thereby affecting their ability to speak communicatively. On the other hand, Romadhon's (2025) study found that students' speaking errors are largely caused by errors in *nahwu* and *sharaf*, such as the mismatch between the use of the verb (*fi'il*) and the pronoun (*dhamir*), errors in *i'rab*, and mistakes in word inflection (*taṣrīf*). These findings indicate that a weak grasp of grammar is a major cause of low proficiency in *Mahārah al-Kalām* (Asiah et al., 2022).

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that intrinsic factors significantly hinder the *Mahārah al-Kalām* abilities of non-pesantren PBA students in the 2024 cohort. These factors include low motivation to learn, low self-confidence, a limited vocabulary (*mufradāt*), and weak mastery of *nahwu* and *sharaf*. These four factors are interrelated and contribute to students' difficulty in formulating and expressing ideas in Arabic. Therefore, instructional approaches are needed that can enhance linguistic skills while simultaneously building students' motivation and self-confidence, so that their Arabic-speaking skills can develop optimally.

2. Extrinsic Factors

a. Teaching Methods Used by Instructors

The instructor's teaching methods do not yet fully provide all students with the opportunity to actively practice speaking. In some sessions, the instructor spends more time explaining the material, vocabulary, and the rules of *nahwu* and *sharaf* before asking students to practice speaking. Speaking activities generally take the form of short dialogues or answering the instructor's questions, so only a few students have the opportunity to use Arabic directly. Students with better speaking skills tend to be more active, while students from non-*pesantren* backgrounds more often remain listeners and wait for their turn to speak.

Based on the interview results, several students stated that they still need more communicative teaching methods that provide more opportunities for speaking practice. According to them, repeated speaking practice in small groups or through language games would be more helpful for boosting their confidence and fluency than learning dominated by material explanations.

These findings align with research by Bariyah and Muassomah (2019), which explains that the use of communicative and practice-based methods, such as *Ta'bīr Ash-Shuwar*, can boost students' confidence and speaking skills by providing broader opportunities to actively use Arabic (Bariyah, 2019).

b. Intensity of Speaking Practice

The intensity of students' speaking practice remains relatively low. Speaking practice in Arabic generally takes place only during the *Mahārah al-Kalām* course. Once class is over, most students revert to using Indonesian when communicating with their peers. The researcher also observed that there is no established habit of using Arabic in academic activities outside the classroom, so students have limited opportunities to become accustomed to speaking Arabic.

Interview results indicate that students admit to rarely practicing on their own because they lack friends with whom they can speak Arabic. Consequently, material learned in class is rarely reviewed, causing speaking skills to develop more slowly. This finding is supported by a study by Ummu Kaltsum et al. (2025), which identifies low practice intensity as one of the main causes of weak *Mahārah al-Kalām* skills. The study shows that regular speaking practice (*mumārasah*) can significantly improve fluency (Kaltsum et al., 2025).

c. Peer Support

Peer support in *Mahārah al-Kalām* courses remains suboptimal. Researchers found that students more often communicate in Indonesian outside the classroom. Although some students have better Arabic-speaking skills, opportunities to encourage their peers to practice speaking remain very limited. As a result, students who lack confidence tend to be passive and rarely get the chance to practice or receive feedback from their peers; most students feel more comfortable practicing with friends than speaking directly in front of the instructor. However, because study groups or the habit of practicing Arabic conversation with one another have not yet been established, opportunities to improve speaking skills remain suboptimal. This situation indicates that a peer environment that does not yet support the use of Arabic is one of the external factors hindering the development of students' *Mahārah al-Kalām*.

These findings align with research by Mofid and Arifin (2025), which reports that implementing the peer teaching method can increase students' active participation, confidence, and motivation in *Mahārah al-Kalām* learning. Through peer teaching, students feel more comfortable discussing, asking questions, and practicing speaking because interactions with peers reduce the fear of making mistakes and foster a more communicative learning atmosphere (Arifin & Mofid, 2025).

d. Lack of an Arabic-Speaking Environment

One of the external factors hindering non-*pesantren* PBA students enrolled in 2022 from mastering *Mahārah al-Kalām* is the lack of an environment that supports the use of Arabic (*bi'ah lughawiyah*). During lectures, students do use Arabic when instructors give instructions or during speaking practice activities. However, once classes end, interactions among students revert to being dominated by Indonesian. The researcher also observed that the use of Arabic outside the classroom remains very limited and has not yet become a habit in daily academic life.

Interview results indicate that the majority of students admit to rarely using Arabic outside of class hours due to the absence of rules or established practices for communicating in Arabic (Gamal, 2025). Students feel more comfortable using Indonesian when discussing topics, working on group assignments, or interacting with peers. As a result, the vocabulary and sentence patterns learned in class are not practiced consistently, which slows the development of speaking skills. This situation indicates that the *Mahārah al-Kalām* instruction is not yet supported by a conducive Arabic-language environment.

In fact, the existence of a language environment plays a crucial role in shaping language habits through the continuous use of Arabic in various activities. The more frequently students are exposed to and use Arabic in daily communication, the greater their fluency, accuracy, and confidence in speaking. Observations show that students almost never use Arabic outside the classroom. Daily communication takes place in Indonesian or regional languages. This situation severely limits students' opportunities to practice their speaking skills.

Unlike students with a *pesantren* background, who are accustomed to using Arabic in daily activities, non-*pesantren* students only use Arabic during lectures. As a result, their speaking skills develop more slowly. Previous research has also shown that the existence of a *bi'ah lughawiyah* is a key factor in improving speaking proficiency (Muhammad et al., 2024).

e. Background in Non-Pesantren Education

Recent findings indicate that educational background has a significant impact on students' speaking ability. Students who did not attend Islamic boarding schools generally have no prior experience learning Arabic in a communicative manner before entering college. Most of them have studied only the Arabic script and a little grammar, with no conversational practice. This situation means they require a longer adaptation period compared to students who are alumni of Islamic boarding schools. This finding is consistent with research showing that students from non-*pesantren* backgrounds face greater challenges in mastering Arabic language skills.

The research results indicate that the difficulties faced by non-*pesantren* students in the 2022 cohort of the Arabic Language Program (PBA) in mastering speaking skills are influenced by a combination of linguistic, psychological, and learning environment factors. These three factors are interrelated and form complex barriers (Baroroh & Rahmawati, 2020). From a linguistic perspective, limited vocabulary is the most dominant factor. Students often understand the content of a conversation but lack sufficient vocabulary to express it in Arabic. As a result, their speech is halting, contains many pauses, and is frequently accompanied by code-switching to Indonesian. These findings reinforce previous research indicating that vocabulary mastery is the primary foundation of speaking proficiency.

Furthermore, a weak grasp of *nahwu* and *sharaf* causes students to hesitate when constructing sentences spontaneously. They tend to overthink the accuracy of their linguistic structure before speaking, which disrupts the flow of communication. This situation indicates that grammar

instruction needs to be integrated with ongoing communication practice so that students not only understand the theory but also apply it in real-life situations (Rokhhmatulloh, 2017).

It can be concluded that extrinsic factors also influence the difficulties faced by non-pesantren PBA students enrolled in 2022 in mastering *Mahārah al-Kalām*. These factors include teaching methods that are not yet fully oriented toward communicative practice, low intensity of speaking practice, suboptimal peer support, and the lack of a supportive Arabic-language environment (*bi'ah lughawīyyah*). These four factors limit students' opportunities to become accustomed to using Arabic in daily communication. Therefore, a more communicative learning process, increased frequency of speaking practice, stronger collaboration among students, and the creation of a conducive Arabic-language environment are necessary for students' *Mahārah al-Kalām* skills to develop optimally. Psychological factors also have a significant influence. Fear of making mistakes, embarrassment about speaking in front of peers, and low self-confidence lead students to prefer to remain silent rather than attempt to communicate in Arabic. These affective barriers can reduce the frequency of practice, even though speaking skills develop only through continuous practice..

Furthermore, a learning environment that does not support the use of Arabic serves as an external factor that exacerbates students' difficulties. The lack of practice outside the classroom means that students do not have the opportunity to review, reinforce, and become accustomed to using Arabic in everyday communication. Therefore, fostering a language-rich environment through programs such as Arabic Day, conversation clubs (*Muhādatsah* Club), Arabic debates, and peer tutoring can be an effective way to improve speaking skills (Aflisia & Harahap, 2019).

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the difficulties experienced by non-pesantren students in mastering *Mahārah al-Kalām* cannot be attributed solely to insufficient linguistic competence. Rather, these difficulties emerge from the interaction between linguistic, psychological, educational, and environmental factors. This finding supports the view that second language speaking ability develops through the interaction of cognitive, affective, and social dimensions rather than through grammatical knowledge alone.

The findings confirm the results reported by Hilmi (2021), who identified limited vocabulary mastery and a lack of communicative learning methods as major obstacles to Arabic-speaking proficiency. However, the present study extends Hilmi's findings by demonstrating that instructional innovation alone is insufficient when learners begin university with substantially different educational backgrounds. Students who graduated from pesantren generally possess stronger prior exposure to communicative Arabic, whereas non-pesantren students often begin higher education with limited opportunities to use Arabic orally. Consequently, instructional adaptation should not only focus on teaching methods but should also accommodate differences in students' initial linguistic competence.

Similarly, the findings are consistent with Yunita and Pebrian (2020), who emphasized the importance of communicative learning and *bi'ah lughawīyyah* in improving Arabic speaking ability. Nevertheless, this study further reveals that the effectiveness of communicative learning is closely associated with students' readiness to participate actively in communication. Even when communicative activities are implemented, students with limited vocabulary and low confidence tend to remain passive unless additional academic support is provided. Therefore, communicative approaches should be complemented by vocabulary reinforcement, structured speaking practice, and gradual scaffolding adapted to learners' proficiency levels.

One of the most significant findings concerns the role of affective factors in shaping students' speaking performance. Interview data revealed that several participants frequently experienced hesitation, fear of making mistakes, and difficulty expressing ideas spontaneously in Arabic. For example, one participant (Yoga) explained that he had only begun learning Arabic seriously after entering university and often "did not know what to say" when asked to speak Arabic. Another participant (Alya) reported forgetting previously memorized vocabulary during spontaneous speaking activities. These experiences illustrate symptoms commonly associated with Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety, in which anxiety interferes with vocabulary retrieval, spontaneous speech production, and learners' willingness to communicate. Such findings reinforce Saudah and Aziz (2025), who argued that low self-confidence represents one of the principal obstacles in *Maharah al-Kalam*. However, this study expands that perspective by demonstrating that students' anxiety is closely related to unequal educational experiences prior to entering university rather than merely reflecting individual psychological characteristics.

The present findings also support Hanifah (2019), who emphasized the central role of learning motivation in Arabic language acquisition. Students with stronger motivation demonstrated greater persistence in memorizing vocabulary, practicing speaking, and participating in classroom interaction despite making mistakes. Conversely, students with lower motivation tended to avoid speaking opportunities because they perceived Arabic as excessively difficult. These findings suggest that motivational support should be an integral component of Arabic instruction rather than merely an individual characteristic of learners.

From a linguistic perspective, this study confirms Romadhon (2025), who reported that speaking errors frequently originate from weaknesses in *nahwu* and *ṣarf*. However, the present findings indicate that grammatical deficiencies not only reduce linguistic accuracy but also influence learners' psychological readiness to communicate. Many participants deliberately postponed speaking because they concentrated excessively on producing grammatically correct sentences before expressing their ideas. Consequently, grammatical knowledge became a source of communication anxiety rather than a facilitator of oral interaction. This finding suggests that grammar instruction should be integrated into communicative speaking activities so that students gradually internalize grammatical structures through meaningful language use instead of relying exclusively on explicit rule memorization.

Overall, these findings contribute to Arabic language education by demonstrating that educational background functions as an important contextual variable influencing students' acquisition of speaking skills. Previous studies primarily emphasized instructional methods or language environments, whereas this study indicates that differences in prior educational experiences substantially shape learners' readiness to benefit from communicative instruction. Therefore, efforts to improve *Maharah al-Kalam* should consider students' initial competencies as an essential component of instructional planning.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study have several implications for Arabic language instruction at the university level. First, Arabic Language Education programs should consider implementing a matriculation or bridging program for incoming students from non-pesantren backgrounds. Such programs may focus on strengthening fundamental vocabulary, pronunciation (*makhārij al-ḥurūf*), basic grammatical structures, and simple communicative expressions before students formally enroll in *Maharah al-Kalam* courses.

Second, lecturers should design more adaptive communicative learning environments by incorporating collaborative speaking activities, peer tutoring, small-group discussions, role-playing, and project-based speaking tasks. These activities may reduce students' speaking anxiety while gradually increasing their confidence and communicative competence.

Third, institutional support is essential for establishing a sustainable Arabic-speaking environment (*bi'ah lughawiyah*). Programs such as Arabic Day, *Muhādatsah* Clubs, debate competitions, peer mentoring, and extracurricular speaking communities may provide students with authentic opportunities to practice Arabic beyond classroom instruction. Such continuous exposure is expected to strengthen both linguistic competence and learners' confidence in using Arabic for daily communication.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research included only non-pesantren students enrolled in the 2022 cohort of the Arabic Language Education Program at UIN Sumatera Utara, which limits the transferability of the findings to other institutional contexts. Second, the descriptive qualitative design focused on understanding students' experiences and therefore did not evaluate the effectiveness of particular instructional interventions. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as context-specific rather than broadly generalizable. Future studies are encouraged to employ mixed-method or experimental designs to examine the effectiveness of adaptive instructional models, vocabulary intervention programs, communicative learning strategies, and technology-assisted Arabic learning in improving *Mahārah al-Kalām* among students from diverse educational backgrounds.

Conclusion

This study concludes that non-pesantren students enrolled in the 2022 cohort of the Arabic Language Education (PBA) Program at Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara face challenges mastering *Mahārah al-Kalām* due to the interaction of intrinsic and extrinsic factors, not limited to linguistic competence alone. Intrinsic factors include limited mastery of vocabulary, weak understanding of *nahwu* and *ṣarf*, low motivation, and insufficient self-confidence. Extrinsic factors include limited communicative speaking practice, teaching methods that don't accommodate diverse backgrounds, insufficient peer support, and the absence of a sustainable Arabic-speaking environment. These factors collectively influence students' readiness to communicate effectively in Arabic.

The study also highlights the importance of students' educational background in Arabic language learning. Compared to pesantren graduates, non-pesantren students generally have less exposure to communicative Arabic learning, leading to greater challenges in developing speaking proficiency. This finding extends previous studies that focused on instructional methods and language environments, emphasizing the need to incorporate learners' prior educational experiences into higher education instruction. The study provides a comprehensive understanding of the difficulties of *Mahārah al-Kalām* by integrating linguistic, psychological, educational, and environmental perspectives. It shows that successful Arabic-speaking development is shaped by learners' internal characteristics and the learning context.

Practically, Arabic Language Education programs should design adaptive learning systems for students from diverse backgrounds. These may include matriculation or bridging programs, vocabulary enrichment, communicative grammar instruction, collaborative speaking activities, peer

tutoring, and sustainable Arabic-speaking environments. These initiatives reduce disparities in initial competencies and promote effective, inclusive Arabic language learning.

The study is limited to non-pesantren students from the 2022 cohort in a single institution and used a descriptive qualitative design. The findings should be interpreted within the context of the participants and cannot be generalized to all Arabic Language Education students. Future research should investigate larger, more diverse groups and evaluate adaptive instructional models, communicative learning strategies, and technology-assisted Arabic language learning to improve *Mahārah al-Kalām* among students from diverse backgrounds.

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