



Contents lists available at [Elora Center](#)

Lentera Negeri

Journal homepage: <https://lentera.eloracenter.org/lentera>



Arabic language learning trajectories: a narrative analysis of identity formation among thai students

Ahmad Maghfurin

Fakultas Tarbiyah dan Ilmu Keguruan, Universitas Islam Negeri Walisongo Semarang, Indonesia

Article Info

Article history:

Received Aug 31th, 2026

Revised Aug 31th, 2026

Accepted Aug 01st, 2026

Keyword:

Arabic language learning trajectories,
Academic adaptation,
Hybrid academic identity,
International students

ABSTRACT

This study takes as its core research subject the Arabic language learning trajectories of Thai international students enrolled at the State Islamic University of Walisongo Semarang, Indonesia. This study is designed with a qualitative research orientation, adopting the narrative inquiry method. Data collection combines documentary analysis and unstructured in-depth interviews. For the analysis stage, this study applies the interactive analysis model proposed by Miles and Huberman. This study maps out a four-stage interconnected trajectory of the international students' Arabic language learning: academic cultural adaptation, language proficiency advancement, competency certification, and the formation of a hybrid academic identity. It also identifies three types of inherent challenges the students face, stemming from differences in educational backgrounds, language foundations, and teaching traditions. In response, the students have developed four corresponding adaptive strategies: interacting with instructors, collaborating with peers, engaging in self-directed learning, and utilizing digital resources. This study further finds that Arabic language competency certification can be converted into three forms of capital: intellectual capital, spiritual capital, and social capital. These capitals support three core competencies of the international students: participation in Islamic academic activities, cross-cultural communication, and resilience in transnational academic environments. The core argument of this study is that Arabic language learning is far from a simple acquisition of linguistic competence, but rather a complex process of identity negotiation.



© 2026 The Authors.

This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-SA license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0>)

Corresponding Author:

Ahmad Maghfurin,

ahmad_maghfurinn@walisongo.ac.id

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to outline what an inclusive academic environment can be created for international students that encourages increased student mobility between countries. Universities not only need to provide an inclusive academic environment, but also a learning system that can support international students in achieving their academic goals (Sutrisno, 2019). In such contexts, linguistic competence emerges as one of the key elements that drive academic adjustment and social interaction, which in turn influences students' success in class participation (Urban & Palmer, 2014). Research shows that a high level of academic language proficiency is important for students to achieve the best understanding of lecture materials, communication with lecturers and fellow students, and a sense of belonging to life in the university environment (Guo & Guo, 2017). This change means that language policy in higher education is no longer seen solely as a tool for learning, but has been integrated into the strategy of institutional internationalization and academic quality improvement, as part of the curricular experience of international students.

Islamic universities differ from most other secular universities, so the Arabic language occupies a strategic space in the Islamic world as one that encourages the exploration of these paths as well as an understanding of classical literature and contemporary literature. This condition has led many Islamic universities to make Arabic courses compulsory for all international students, even though students come from various academic disciplines outside the field of Language (Amir, 2025). Or applied in the form of Arabic language competency certification with a minimum score as a graduation requirement at several universities. This policy shows that mastery of Arabic is seen academically as a competency that every graduate should possess (Assegaf, Zainiyah & Fahmi, 2022). But behind these policies lie various experiences, challenges, learning patterns, and adjustment processes of international students through their fields of study.

A number of studies on international students generally focus on academic adaptation, language competence, cross-cultural communication, and factors that affect study success (Knight, 2012). On the other hand, Ahmad, Buchanan & Ahmad's (2016) research on learning Arabic for foreign speakers discusses more about learning methods, learning motivation, curriculum development, and language skills improvement. Kamal (2025) in his research also examines language policy and language competency assessment in the higher education environment. Despite this, most studies still place international students as the object of evaluating learning success or the implementation of institutional policies. The perspective of students as subjects who experience, interpret, and build meaning towards the obligation to take Arabic courses and Arabic competency certification is still relatively limited, especially in the context of Islamic universities (Jon, 2013).

These limitations lead to a more holistic understanding of Arabic language learning, not just as an operational level for linguistic competence, but as an academic experience that embodies the learning journey of international students through their experience of studying abroad (De Wit, 2019). The experience of taking required courses, meeting competency certification demands, learning learning strategies, and finally graduating forms a series of experiences that are closely interrelated and teleological depart separately but still meaningful for each student. Narrative Inquiry is appropriate for this study, because it examines how students rearrange these experiences into a narrative that not only tells the process of adaptation and challenges, turning points, and transformations during their education in Islamic higher education institutions (Cudmore, 2005). As a result, this study provides an understanding not only of what students experience, but also how they interpret these experiences during their studies in school. This study addresses three key questions: how Thai international students progress from academic adaptation to Arabic language proficiency; how they experience the transition from proficiency to certified Arabic language skills; and, ultimately, how these two factors form the basis for the shift from certification to an academic identity rooted in the Arabic language.

This study provides a new perspective based on the above picture by examining the experiences of international students as part of its analytical framework in understanding how mandatory Arabic language policies and Arabic competency certifications are implemented in Islamic higher education institutions. In contrast to most previous studies that have largely focused on learning assessment or institutional policy, this study presents the student's learning experience as an academic journey (provoked and) told the process of representing meaning. The findings of this study will expand the scope of study on learning Arabic for non-native speakers, Islamic higher education policies, and the internationalization of higher education through student experiences (Jon, 2013). This study intends to examine how international students tell their stories of taking compulsory Arabic courses, how they undergo the preparation and implementation of Arabic competency certification as a prerequisite for graduation, and how the overall experience is interpreted in their programs at Islamic higher education institutions.

Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a Narrative Inquiry design to deeply understand how international students construct, tell, and interpret their experiences in participating in compulsory Arabic language courses and meeting Arabic competency certification as one of the graduation requirements in Islamic universities. This approach is based on the interpretivism paradigm that views social reality as something that is shaped through subjective experiences and individual interactions with the socio-cultural context in which they are located (Crotty, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). In line with this paradigm, this study also adopts a constructivist qualitative inquiry orientation that places knowledge as the result of the construction of meaning built by participants through reflection on their life experiences, so that the resulting narrative is understood not as an objective representation of an event, but as a personal interpretation influenced by their respective cultural, religious, linguistic, and academic backgrounds (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Narrative Inquiry was chosen in this context because it allows researchers to trace their experiences chronologically, starting from the beginning of entry into the academic environment, through Arabic language

courses, facing various linguistic and academic challenges, to finally passing the Arabic language competency test as part of their educational experience (Clandinin & Connelly 2000). This research was conducted at the State Islamic University (UIN) Walisongo Semarang, which stipulates a policy on the implementation of Arabic language courses and Arabic competency certification as one of the requirements for completing the study. The research informants were selected purposively, with reference to the fact that they had experiences that corresponded to what was being studied (Patton 2015). All informants are foreign students from Southern Thailand (Patani) who are taking non-Arabic study programs at UIN Walisongo Semarang. This group was chosen, among other things, for academic reasons: they came from a region with a long history of Islamic culture, so the introduction to Arabic had occurred long before. However, they still have to take compulsory Arabic courses and obtain a minimum score of 300 on the Arabic competency certification in order to pass. These situations make the experiences relevant to uncover the adaptation process, learning strategies, challenges faced, and meanings built during their educational journey at an Islamic university.

Table 1. Informant profiles

Initials	Lecture place	Gender	Country of Origin
TH1	Universitas Islam Negeri Walisongo Semarang	Women	Thailand
TH2	Universitas Islam Negeri Walisongo Semarang	Women	Thailand
TH3	Universitas Islam Negeri Walisongo Semarang	Women	Thailand
TH4	Universitas Islam Negeri Walisongo Semarang	Women	Thailand
TH5	Universitas Islam Negeri Walisongo Semarang	Women	Thailand
TH6	Universitas Islam Negeri Walisongo Semarang	Male	Thailand

The research data was collected through narrative in-depth interviews and participatory observations, allowing researchers to gain a comprehensive understanding of the Arabic language learning journey experienced by international students. The interview was conducted in a semi-structured manner using open-ended questions that encouraged participants to convey their experiences chronologically, starting from the motivation to study at UIN Walisongo Semarang, the experience of taking compulsory Arabic courses, the process of preparing for the Arabic competency certification, to their reflection on the meaning of the experience in the academic journey. During the interview process, the researcher provides space for participants to develop stories according to the experiences that are considered the most meaningful, because in Narrative Inquiry knowledge is built through narratives that arise naturally, not through answers that are limited by predetermined categories (Clandinin, 2013; Riessman, 2008).

Participatory observation is used to understand the rich context in terms of students entering Arabic language learning, their interaction with lecturers and peers, along with participation in academic activities, as well as dynamics during certification preparation related to competence in Arabic. When combined, these two techniques help to triangulate sources and methods, allowing for a more in-depth interpretation of participants' experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Data are collected through concurrent analysis until thematic saturation is achieved, which is defined as when new themes or substantive meanings are no longer acquired (Saunders et al., 2018). Taking into account that the interpretivist paradigm recognizes that the researcher is an integral part of the construction of meaning, this study enhances reflexivity through reflective journals, field notes to prepare and capture themes that arise during data collection, as well as ongoing analytical conversations about assumptions or biases on the part of the researcher as the bias develops through the study process (Berger, 2015). Prior to giving consent to participate consciously, all participants receive an explanation of the reasons for the research and how the data will be collected, their right to withdraw at any time, and the guarantee of identity confidentiality. Interestingly, to further maintain the integrity of the research, the participants were given a coded pseudonym (the coding system is presented in Table VI) and all digital data was stored securely and only maintained for academic use according to the guidelines of social research ethics principles (Orb et al., 2001).

Data analysis was carried out simultaneously with data collection, following an interactive model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) which consists of three components: data condensation, data presentation, conclusion drawing and verification; this is operationalized in this study through iterative coding procedures and thematic analysis to adjust the characteristics of Narrative Inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly 2000). We started by transcribing all the results of the interviews verbatim and compiling them together with observational notes and reflective journals into a single data corpus. Then, before starting the coding process, the researcher conducts immersive reading to gain a thorough understanding of each participant's storyline. The coding process follows an iterative circular pattern, starting with initial coding to identify the meaningful units that appear in the narrative; focused coding to group codes that have conceptual suitability; followed by axial coding that builds

relationships between themes so as to produce structurally coherent life experiences related to the Arabic learning journey of international students (Saldaña, 2021).

Results and Discussions

The findings of this study show that Thai international students at UIN Walisongo Semarang experience compulsory Arabic language courses as a gradual process of academic, linguistic, and cultural adaptation. Rather than functioning solely as a formal language-learning requirement, the Arabic course provides a transitional space through which students adjust to different learning practices, develop linguistic competence, build confidence, and become familiar with the academic culture of an Islamic university. The analysis identified five interconnected themes: (1) initial academic and linguistic difficulties, (2) learning through lecturers and peers, (3) independent learning and the use of digital media, (4) adaptation to the academic culture of an Islamic university, and (5) increasing confidence and readiness for Arabic language competency certification.

To ensure analytical transparency, the interview transcripts and classroom observation notes were analyzed through a systematic thematic coding procedure. The analysis began with repeated reading of the interview transcripts to identify meaningful statements concerning students' experiences in compulsory Arabic language courses. Relevant segments were then assigned initial descriptive codes, including "limited Arabic proficiency," "different teaching methods," "anxiety," "passive participation," "lecturer interaction," "peer discussion," "independent practice," "digital learning," "academic-cultural adaptation," "Arabic for Islamic literature," and "increased confidence." The initial codes were subsequently compared across the informants and grouped according to conceptual similarities. Related codes were then consolidated into broader categories that represented recurring patterns across the data. The resulting categories were compared with the classroom observation findings to identify convergence between students' reported experiences and their observed learning behaviors. The final themes were therefore developed inductively from the empirical data rather than predetermined before the analysis.

Tabel 2. The coding process produces a thematic matrix

Identified Theme	Representative Initial Codes	Informants Contributing	Frequency (n)	Evidence
Initial academic and linguistic difficulties	Limited Arabic proficiency; different teaching methods; anxiety; passive participation; unfamiliar learning environment	TH1, TH2, TH3, TH4, TH5	5	Interview narratives and early classroom observations
Learning through lecturers and peers	Lecturer interaction; asking questions; discussion; peer assistance; collaborative learning	TH1, TH2, TH3, TH4, TH5	5	Interviews and classroom observations
Independent learning and digital media	Daily practice; learning videos; translator applications; digital dictionaries; self-directed learning	TH1, TH2, TH4, TH5	4	Interview narratives and observations
Adaptation to Islamic academic culture	Arabic as access to Islamic literature; academic communication; understanding Islamic university culture; preparation for subsequent study	TH1, TH2, TH3, TH4, TH5	5	Interviews and observations
Increasing confidence and competency readiness	Greater confidence; active participation; Arabic communication; academic readiness; certification preparation	TH1, TH2, TH3, TH4, TH5	5	Interviews and classroom observations

The frequencies in the matrix refer to the number of informants whose narratives contained substantive evidence related to a particular theme, rather than the number of times a word or code occurred. Because a single informant could contribute evidence to more than one theme, the frequencies are not mutually exclusive. This coding structure indicates that the dominant pattern across the participants was a transformation from initial difficulty toward greater academic and linguistic confidence. Interaction with lecturers and peers, independent learning practices, and engagement with digital resources functioned as important mechanisms through which this transformation occurred.

The first theme concerns students' initial academic and linguistic difficulties. Most students experienced challenges when they began the compulsory Arabic language courses because their previous educational backgrounds and learning experiences in Thailand differed from the learning environment at UIN Walisongo Semarang. The difficulties were not limited to Arabic vocabulary or grammatical structures but also involved unfamiliar teaching methods and expectations for classroom participation. During the early stages of the course, some students appeared passive, relied more heavily on their mother tongue when communicating with peers, and showed hesitation when responding to lecturers' questions in Arabic. These observations correspond with the students' narratives, which described the first semester as a period characterized by uncertainty, anxiety, and adjustment.

The theme of gradual academic adaptation is particularly evident in TH2's narrative. The informant explained:

"... In the first semester I found it very difficult because the way of teaching Arabic on campus was different from in Thailand. After frequent discussions with lecturers and friends, I began to understand the material and was more confident in using Arabic in class..." (TH2, interview, July 11, 2026).

This statement demonstrates that the initial difficulty was associated not only with Arabic proficiency but also with differences in pedagogical practices between the students' previous educational experiences and the academic environment at UIN Walisongo Semarang. The narrative further indicates that interaction with lecturers and peers became an important mechanism for reducing uncertainty and facilitating academic adjustment. Thus, the students' adaptation developed through participation and interaction rather than through individual linguistic acquisition alone.

The second theme concerns learning through lecturers and peers. The coding indicates that academic interaction was consistently mentioned as an important source of support during the adaptation process. Students gradually became more willing to ask questions, participate in discussions, seek clarification from lecturers, and work collaboratively with their peers. These interactions helped students understand difficult materials while simultaneously creating opportunities to practice Arabic in authentic academic situations. Classroom observations reinforced this pattern. Whereas students were initially hesitant to respond to questions and participate in discussions, their participation became more active as the course progressed. Students increasingly engaged in group discussions, asked lecturers for clarification, and used Arabic more frequently in classroom communication.

The importance of peer interaction is also evident in the narrative of TH5, who described how social interaction complemented formal classroom learning. The informant stated:

"... At first, I was afraid to speak Arabic because my skills were still limited. I then got used to practicing every day using learning videos and discussing with friends, so that slowly I was more courageous to communicate and participate in lectures..." (TH5, interview, July 12, 2026).

This account illustrates the connection between peer interaction and the development of communicative confidence. Discussions with friends provided students with an informal space to practice Arabic without the pressure associated with formal classroom performance. Consequently, interaction with peers functioned not only as academic assistance but also as a mechanism for overcoming psychological barriers to language use.

The third theme concerns the development of independent learning strategies and the use of digital media. The coding shows that students did not depend exclusively on classroom instruction to overcome their linguistic difficulties. Instead, they gradually developed self-directed learning practices, including repeated daily practice, the use of learning videos, translator applications, and digital dictionaries. These practices enabled students to review materials independently and obtain additional linguistic support when they encountered difficulties during lectures or daily communication. TH5's narrative particularly demonstrates this transition from dependence on formal instruction toward more autonomous learning. The informant's reference to practicing every day through learning videos shows that students actively extended their learning beyond the classroom.

The observation data further support this finding. During the early stages of the course, students tended to rely more heavily on direct explanations from lecturers and showed hesitation when attempting to use Arabic independently. As the learning process continued, students increasingly used digital dictionaries and translator applications to support their understanding of unfamiliar vocabulary and expressions. These behaviors indicate that digital media became complementary learning resources that supported students' efforts to cope with linguistic difficulties and develop greater learning autonomy. Therefore, independent learning emerged as an important component of the adaptation process, particularly for students whose previous Arabic learning experiences differed from the requirements of the university context.

The fourth theme concerns adaptation to the academic culture of an Islamic university. The students' narratives indicate that Arabic was not perceived merely as a collection of grammatical structures or vocabulary items. Instead, students increasingly understood Arabic as an important medium for accessing Islamic literature and participating in the academic culture of UIN Walisongo Semarang. This perception represents a broader form of adaptation in which language learning becomes connected to students' understanding of the academic environment in which they are studying. The compulsory Arabic course therefore serves a dual function: developing linguistic competence and facilitating students' entry into the academic culture of an Islamic higher education institution.

This interpretation is clearly reflected in the narrative of TH1:

"... For me, Arabic courses are not only learning grammar, but also learning to understand the academic culture at UIN Walisongo. The more I read the book and the more I discussed, the more prepared I am for my next lecture and Arabic certification..." (TH1, interview, July 12, 2026).

TH1's statement indicates that Arabic proficiency is understood instrumentally and culturally. The ability to read Arabic texts provides students with greater access to Islamic literature, while participation in discussions helps them become familiar with academic practices at an Islamic university. The reference to preparation for subsequent lectures and Arabic certification also demonstrates that students increasingly connect their current learning experiences with future academic requirements. Thus, adaptation to Arabic is simultaneously an adaptation to the broader intellectual environment of Islamic higher education.

The fifth theme concerns increasing confidence and readiness for the next academic stage. The narratives and observations demonstrate a gradual transformation in students' psychological and communicative positioning. In the early stages, students were characterized by hesitation, anxiety, limited participation, and uncertainty about their ability to communicate in Arabic. As they gained more experience through classroom interaction, peer discussion, independent practice, and digital learning, they became increasingly confident in using Arabic. This change was visible not only in students' self-reported experiences but also in their classroom behavior. Students who initially appeared passive gradually became more willing to answer lecturers' questions, participate in group discussions, and use Arabic in academic and everyday interactions with peers.

The development of confidence is closely connected with the students' preparation for Arabic language competency certification. Rather than perceiving certification as an isolated examination, students increasingly viewed it as the next stage of a learning trajectory that had begun with their adaptation to the compulsory Arabic course. The course therefore provided students with linguistic foundations, learning habits, communicative confidence, and psychological readiness for subsequent academic demands. TH1's statement regarding preparation for "the next lecture and Arabic certification" illustrates this connection between present learning experiences and future academic expectations.

The integration of interview and observation data further confirms that the adaptation process was gradual and multidimensional. The interview data provide evidence of students' subjective experiences of difficulty, interaction, independent learning, cultural adjustment, and increasing confidence, while the observations demonstrate corresponding changes in classroom participation and learning behavior. In the early stages, some students were passive, frequently used their mother tongue during peer discussions, and hesitated to respond to lecturers in Arabic. Over time, however, they became more active in group discussions, asked questions, practiced Arabic more frequently, and utilized digital tools such as translator applications and digital dictionaries. The convergence of these sources strengthens the interpretation that students' academic adaptation developed through the interaction of linguistic practice, social support, independent learning, and exposure to the academic culture of an Islamic university.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the experience of Thai international students in compulsory Arabic language courses at UIN Walisongo Semarang can be understood as a transformation from initial adaptation to emerging competence. The transformation encompasses more than an improvement in linguistic skills. It includes the development of independent learning strategies, increased confidence in communication, greater engagement with lecturers and peers, and a deeper understanding of Arabic as part of the academic culture of an Islamic university. The course consequently functions as an adaptive academic space in which students negotiate differences in educational background, develop new learning habits, and gradually acquire the linguistic and psychological readiness required for subsequent academic demands. This process ultimately establishes the foundation for students to engage more effectively with Islamic academic literature, participate in university learning activities, and prepare for Arabic language competency certification.

For credibility and confirmability, the study employed a single-coder approach. No inter-coder reliability statistic such as Cohen's kappa was calculated because the coding was conducted by one researcher. To reduce

the possibility of subjective interpretation, the emerging themes were reviewed against the original transcript segments and compared across informants, while the interview interpretations were also checked against classroom observation data. In addition, member checking was conducted with selected participants to confirm that the researchers' interpretations accurately represented their experiences. This procedure was used to strengthen the credibility of the conceptual categories and ensure that the final themes remained grounded in the participants' narratives and observed learning practices.

From Competencies to certified Arabic language skills

The foundation of competency developed through participation in compulsory Arabic language courses subsequently shapes how Thai international students prepare for and interpret Arabic language competency certification as one of the graduation requirements. The findings show that students no longer perceive certification as a separate examination disconnected from their previous learning experiences. Rather, they understand certification as a continuation and formal validation of competencies developed throughout the Arabic learning process. Linguistic competence, independent learning strategies, academic discipline, and confidence developed during the course encourage students to strengthen their existing competencies through practice questions, group study, mentoring programs, consultation with lecturers, and increased use of Arabic in academic activities. Although some students continue to experience psychological pressure because of the minimum competency standards required for graduation, their previous experience of adapting to Arabic learning enables them to manage anxiety more effectively, maintain learning discipline, and utilize social support from lecturers and peers. Thus, certification represents not only an assessment of linguistic competence but also a stage at which students mobilize the academic and adaptive capacities developed throughout their learning journey.

To provide analytical transparency, the data concerning certification preparation were analyzed using the same thematic coding procedure applied to the interview and observation data. The analysis began with repeated reading of the interview transcripts and observation notes, followed by the identification of meaningful segments related to students' preparation for and interpretation of Arabic competency certification. Initial codes included "existing competency foundation," "increased practice," "group study," "practice questions," "mentoring," "academic discipline," "exam anxiety," "anxiety management," "lecturer support," "peer support," and "certification as competency validation." These initial codes were then compared across the available informants and grouped according to conceptual similarities. Through this process, the initial codes were consolidated into four broader themes: (1) certification as a continuation of prior learning, (2) strengthening competence through independent and collaborative preparation, (3) psychological readiness and anxiety management, and (4) certification as validation of academic competence. The emerging themes were subsequently compared with observation findings to determine whether students' reported preparation strategies were reflected in their actual academic behaviors.

Tabel 3. The coding process resulted in the second thematic matrix

Identified Theme	Representative Initial Codes	Informants Contributing	Frequency (n)	Evidence
Certification as a continuation of prior learning	Existing competency foundation; no need to start from scratch; strengthening previous material; continuity of learning	TH1, TH6	2	Interviews
Strengthening competence through independent and collaborative preparation	Practice questions; increased practice; group study; mentoring; lecturer consultation; digital learning	TH1, TH6, and observation participants	2*	Interviews and observations
Psychological readiness and anxiety management	Nervousness; minimum grade pressure; study discipline; persistence; confidence; managing anxiety	TH1, TH3	2	Interviews and observations
Certification as validation of academic competence	Graduation requirement; proving ability; competency validation; recognition of learning outcomes	TH1, TH6	2	Interviews
Social support as a preparation mechanism	Peer support; lecturer support; academic consultation; mutual motivation	TH1, TH3	2	Interviews and observations

The frequency refers to the number of named interview informants in the available evidence who explicitly contributed to the theme. Observation data were used as corroborating evidence rather than counted as additional informants.

The coding results demonstrate that certification preparation is closely connected with the competencies established during the compulsory Arabic language courses. Rather than restarting the learning process, students tend to concentrate on reinforcing previously acquired knowledge and skills. This pattern is particularly evident in the narratives concerning practice, group study, mentoring, and academic consultation. At the same time, certification preparation involves a psychological dimension, as students must manage anxiety associated with minimum graduation standards. The data therefore suggest that certification readiness is multidimensional, involving linguistic competence, learning autonomy, academic discipline, psychological readiness, and social support.

The first theme concerns certification as a continuation of prior learning. Students' narratives indicate that the competencies developed during compulsory Arabic language courses provide an important foundation for subsequent certification preparation. Students do not perceive themselves as beginning the learning process again when approaching the certification examination. Instead, they review, reinforce, and extend material that has already been encountered during their university learning experience. This interpretation demonstrates continuity between the classroom learning process and the formal assessment stage.

This perspective is clearly reflected in TH6's experience:

"... When facing the certification, I didn't start learning from scratch anymore because the material during college was already the foundation. I just increased my practice and group study to be better prepared when taking the competency exam..." (TH6, interview, July 11, 2026).

TH6's statement indicates that the compulsory Arabic course has provided a competency foundation that subsequently structures the student's preparation strategy. The emphasis is therefore placed on reinforcement rather than initial acquisition. Increased practice and group study become strategies for consolidating previously acquired knowledge and preparing for the specific demands of the competency examination. The finding suggests that the effectiveness of the certification preparation process is partly dependent on the quality of learning habits and linguistic foundations established during the earlier course.

The second theme concerns strengthening competence through independent and collaborative preparation. The interview data show that students respond to certification demands by increasing the intensity and structure of their learning activities. Practice questions, group study, mentoring, lecturer consultation, and the use of digital learning resources become important mechanisms for strengthening Arabic competence. These activities indicate that students take an increasingly active role in managing their own preparation. At this stage, learning is no longer confined to scheduled classroom sessions but extends into self-directed and collaborative academic activities.

The observation data reinforce this finding. During the certification preparation period, Thai international students were observed actively engaging in various forms of academic strengthening. Students worked on practice questions independently and collectively, discussed material that they did not understand, consulted lecturers, and used digital media to deepen their Arabic language knowledge. Participation in mentoring activities was also accompanied by peer encouragement and increased use of Arabic during academic discussions. These observations demonstrate that students' preparation was characterized by active engagement rather than passive reception of instructional materials.

The third theme concerns psychological readiness and anxiety management. Although the students had developed linguistic competence through the compulsory Arabic courses, certification remained associated with psychological pressure because of the minimum scores required for graduation. The findings therefore indicate that academic competence does not completely eliminate examination anxiety. Instead, students appear to develop greater capacity to manage such anxiety through learning discipline, persistence, interaction with lecturers, and support from peers.

This dimension is evident in TH3's narrative:

"... I still feel nervous ahead of certification because there are minimum grades to achieve. However, the experience of attending Arabic lectures made me more disciplined in studying, daring to ask questions to lecturers, and not giving up easily..." (TH3, interview, July 12, 2026).

The statement demonstrates a shift from simply experiencing anxiety toward developing strategies for managing it. Although nervousness remains present, the student identifies discipline, willingness to ask questions, and persistence as resources developed through previous learning experiences. Thus, psychological readiness should not be understood as the complete absence of anxiety but as the capacity to continue engaging in purposeful preparation despite the presence of examination pressure.

The observation findings provide further support for this interpretation. During the certification preparation period, some students still displayed signs of anxiety, particularly before mock examinations. Nevertheless, they continued to participate in mentoring activities, complete practice tasks, discuss difficult material, motivate one another, and communicate in Arabic during academic activities. The coexistence of anxiety and continued academic engagement suggests that students' previous adaptation experiences have contributed to the development of coping capacities that enable them to remain academically engaged under evaluative pressure.

The fourth theme concerns students' interpretation of certification as a validation of competencies developed through the learning process. Rather than understanding certification exclusively as an administrative requirement for graduation, students increasingly perceive it as an opportunity to demonstrate the abilities they have developed through their academic experiences. Certification consequently acquires a meaning beyond formal assessment because it provides students with an opportunity to confirm the progress they have made in Arabic language learning.

This perspective is particularly evident in TH1's narrative:

"... In my opinion, certification is not just a graduation requirement, but an opportunity to prove the abilities that have been trained during college. The support of friends and lecturers made me more confident in using Arabic in exams and academic activities..." (TH1, interview, July 11, 2026).

TH1's statement indicates a shift in the meaning attributed to certification. The examination is not merely perceived as an external institutional demand but as a moment for students to demonstrate the competencies developed through sustained learning. The reference to support from friends and lecturers also shows that students' interpretation of certification is connected to their broader academic relationships. Confidence in the examination context is therefore constructed not only through individual preparation but also through social interaction and academic support.

The fifth theme concerns the role of social support in certification preparation. Across the interview and observation data, lecturers and peers function as important resources for students preparing for certification. Students consult lecturers when they encounter difficulties, discuss practice materials with peers, participate in group study, and motivate one another during the preparation period. This finding suggests that certification readiness is socially embedded. Students' individual competencies are reinforced through academic relationships that provide clarification, encouragement, and opportunities for collaborative practice.

The integration of interview and observation findings indicates that the transition from compulsory Arabic learning to competency certification is characterized by continuity rather than separation. The linguistic foundations established during the course provide the academic capital necessary for certification preparation, while independent learning strategies allow students to intensify their preparation according to their individual needs. At the same time, peer collaboration and lecturer support provide social resources that reinforce learning and confidence. Observation data further demonstrate that these reported strategies are reflected in students' actual behaviors through practice activities, group discussions, mentoring participation, consultation with lecturers, and the continued use of Arabic in academic interactions.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Arabic language competency certification functions as a continuation and formal validation of the academic adaptation process developed through compulsory Arabic language courses. Students' readiness is shaped not only by their mastery of linguistic content but also by their ability to organize independent learning, participate in collaborative preparation, manage examination anxiety, maintain academic discipline, and mobilize social support. Certification therefore represents a transition point at which previously developed learning experiences are transformed into formally recognized academic competence. The students' narratives further show that their interpretation of the certification process evolves from viewing it as a compulsory graduation requirement toward understanding it as an opportunity to demonstrate the competencies and confidence developed throughout their academic journey.

For credibility and confirmability, the certification-related data were analyzed using a single-coder approach. Because the coding was conducted by one researcher, Cohen's kappa or another inter-coder reliability coefficient was not calculated. Instead, credibility was strengthened through repeated comparison between the emerging codes and the original transcript segments, cross-case comparison among informants, and triangulation with classroom observations. In addition, member checking was used with selected participants to confirm whether the researchers' interpretations of their certification preparation experiences accurately reflected their intended meanings. These procedures helped ensure that the final conceptual categories remained grounded in the participants' narratives while also being supported by observed academic behaviors.

From Certification to Arabic Academic Identity for Thai Students

The meaning that students build on their academic journey is the result of the continuation of adaptation experiences during lectures and proof of competence through Arabic language certification. The findings of the study show that the two stages are perceived as a complementary learning process in shaping their identity as international students in Islamic universities. The experience of facing various academic challenges, the success of developing Arabic language competencies, and the achievement of certification encourage students to view Arabic no longer as just a compulsory course or an administrative requirement for graduation, but as intellectual capital that strengthens the ability to understand Islamic sources, increases confidence in cross-cultural communication, and opens up academic and professional opportunities in the future. The student narrative also shows that the process gives birth to resilience, learning independence, and adaptability in a multicultural academic environment. Thus, the journey of taking compulsory Arabic courses to completing competency certification forms an awareness that mastery of Arabic is an academic, spiritual, and social investment that supports the success of their studies while preparing them to contribute to the academic community and global society.

The findings of the study show that the meaning that students build on their academic journey is an accumulation of adaptation experience while participating in compulsory Arabic courses and proving competence through certification. The two stages are perceived as a mutually continuous learning process so that it not only results in mastery of the Arabic language, but also shapes the way students understand their role as international students in Islamic universities. In their narrative, Arabic has undergone a shift in meaning, from just a compulsory course to a medium that strengthens academic, spiritual, and social capacity in a multicultural educational environment.

This change in meaning is reflected in TH4's experience which confirms that mastery of Arabic has gone beyond administrative functions as a graduation requirement. The informant said,

"... Now I feel like Arabic isn't just about passing a college or a certification. This ability helped me understand the book, discuss with friends from different countries, and make me more confident as an international student..." (TH4, interview, July 11, 2026).

This statement shows that the learning experience and certification have broadened students' orientation towards the Arabic language as intellectual capital that strengthens access to Islamic literature while enhancing the ability to interact in the international academic community.

In addition to forming academic competencies, the experience also gave birth to personal transformation marked by increased learning independence and resilience in facing academic challenges. This was revealed by TH2 which stated,

"... The journey of learning Arabic taught me to be more independent and not afraid to face challenges. After passing the certification, I am more and more convinced that my Arabic language skills will be beneficial for my further studies and later work..." (TH2, interview, July 12, 2026).

This narrative shows that certification is not perceived as the end point of the learning process, but as a momentum that strengthens students' belief in the relevance of Arabic language competencies for academic and professional development in the future.

The findings of the interview were strengthened by the results of observations after students completed the Arabic language competency certification. Thai international students appear to be more active in participating in academic discussions, using Arabic when interacting with lecturers and fellow students, and showing greater confidence in expressing opinions. They also seem to be more independent in accessing Arabic-language literature, sharing learning experiences with other students, and utilizing Arabic language skills as part of their daily academic activities. The results of this observation show that the experience of participating in compulsory courses and certifications has resulted in changes in academic behavior that reflect the development of identity as a more adaptive, independent, and confident learner.

The dimension of identity transformation is also seen in the TH5 narrative which interprets the entire learning process as a self-shaping experience. The informant explained,

"... All the processes from taking courses to certification have made me grow. I learned to adapt to a new environment, appreciate cultural differences, and see Arabic as an important provision for my academic future..." (TH5, interview, July 11, 2026).

The citation shows that the journey of learning Arabic has encouraged students to develop an academic identity that is not only supported by linguistic competence, but also by adaptability, sensitivity to cultural diversity, and a long-term orientation towards academic development.

Overall, the integration of the results of interviews and observations shows that the academic identity of Thai international students is formed through a cumulative process, starting from academic adaptation, strengthened by the development of Arabic language competencies, validated through certification, and finally interpreted as capital to face global academic challenges. Thus, mastery of the Arabic language does not stop as an achievement of individual competence, but develops into an intellectual, spiritual, and social investment that forms a hybrid academic identity, namely an academic identity that integrates linguistic skills, Islamic values, cross-cultural competence, and readiness to participate in the international academic community.

This study shows that the journey of Thai international students at UIN Walisongo Semarang in participating in compulsory Arabic courses takes place as a gradual process that starts from academic and cultural adaptation, develops into mastery of language competence, to forming academic identity. In the initial phase, students face challenges in the form of differences in educational background, Arabic language proficiency level, and learning methods compared to their home countries. However, through active interaction with lecturers, discussions with peers, continuous practice, and the use of digital media, they managed to develop a more independent learning strategy so that anxiety transformed into confidence in using Arabic for academic and daily communication purposes. Linguistic competence, study habits, and psychological readiness formed during lectures then became the main foundation in preparing for Arabic language competency certification as a graduation requirement.

Students interpret certification not as a separate evaluation, but as a logical continuation of the learning process that encourages them to strengthen the material, improve learning discipline, manage anxiety, and utilize the support of lecturers and fellow students. Success in obtaining certification further shapes the way they interpret the entire academic journey as a process of self-transformation. Arabic is no longer seen as just a compulsory course or administrative requirement, but as an intellectual, spiritual, and social capital that strengthens the ability to understand Islamic literature, increases confidence in cross-cultural communication, and forms an academic identity as an international student who is resilient, adaptive, and ready to contribute to the academic community and global society.

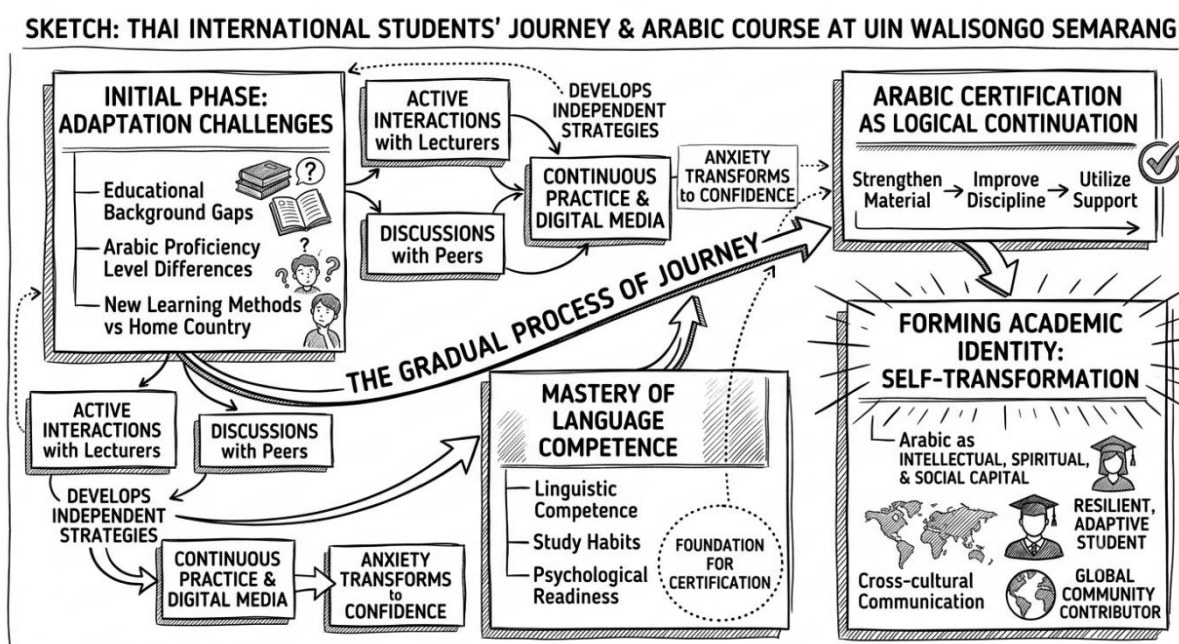


Figure 1. Research findings flow

Arabic learning for Thai international students at UIN Walisongo Semarang cannot be understood solely as a process of second language acquisition, but as a process of negotiation of academic identity that takes place through adaptation to epistemic norms, institutional culture, and academic expectations of Islamic universities. These findings show that the initial difficulties experienced by students are not primarily caused by linguistic limitations, but by the encounter between two academic cultures that have different learning orientations, pedagogical practices, and scientific traditions. In the perspective of Communities of Practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), learning Arabic is a process of moving from *legitimate peripheral participation* to full participation in the Islamic academic community. However, these findings also expand the theory because it shows that such displacement requires not only social participation, but also the simultaneous process of reconstructing religious, academic, and transnational identities. Thus, Arabic competence emerged as a result of social and symbolic negotiations, rather than simply the accumulation of linguistic ability.

The interpretation presents an interesting conceptual tension. The international literature on student mobility generally views academic adaptation as an integration mechanism towards learning success (Tinto, 2012; Marginson, 2014). However, these findings show that adaptation actually takes place through a process of contestation between the educational habitus of Thai students and the academic culture of Islamic universities in Indonesia. Students do not completely abandon previous educational experiences, but build a hybrid identity that blends learning practices from both contexts. Within the framework of Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) habitus theory, this process represents a negotiation between the cultural capital that students already have and the symbolic capital that is legitimized by the institution. Arabic then acquired a dual function: as an academic competence as well as a source of *symbolic legitimacy* that determined the position of students in the Islamic academic community. These findings challenge the assumption that language learning success is adequately explained through the enhancement of individual ability, since academic legitimacy is also produced through institutional recognition of certain forms of cultural capital.

This tension is even more evident when Arabic competency certification is positioned not as an administrative evaluation instrument, but as an arena for identity transformation. In many higher education systems, certification is often understood as a manifestation of the logic of neoliberalism that turns competencies into credentials to increase the competitiveness of the workforce (Brown, Hesketh, & Williams, 2003; Wheelahan, 2015). This finding reveals a different paradox. Certification does produce formal legitimacy, but the meaning that students build goes beyond the function of the credentialist. Certification becomes a reflective mechanism that connects learning experiences, academic discipline, anxiety management, and confidence building. In other words, certification not only generates employability capital, but also strengthens the formation of academic and spiritual identity. This interpretation expands the debate on *credentialism* by showing that in the context of Islamic higher education, certification still contains pedagogical and moral dimensions that cannot be fully reduced to the logic of the job market.

At the same time, these findings reveal a broader structural contradiction in the transformation of religion-based education. On the one hand, Islamic universities are facing global pressure to produce graduates who have certifications, measurable competencies, and international competitiveness in response to the *graduate employability* crisis and increasing accountability of higher education (Tomlinson, 2017). On the other hand, the institution still maintains a normative orientation to form religious character, Islamic literacy, and moral authority. This tension represents a form of curriculum dualism, which is the encounter between the instrumental demands of modern higher education and the transformative mission of Islamic education. In contrast to the narrative that sees the two orientations as oppositions that cannot be met, these findings show that students actually construct relationships that are integrative. Mastery of the Arabic language is understood as capital that has academic, religious, social, and professional values. Thus, the boundary between vocational competence and character formation becomes increasingly fluid.

The theoretical contribution of this research lies in the development of a conceptual model regarding hybrid academic identity formation in international Islamic higher education. Previous studies on second language learning have emphasized more linguistic dimensions, learning motivation, or psychological adaptation (Dörnyei, 2009; Norton, 2013), while research on Islamic education tends to focus on the transmission of religious values or character building. These findings show that these two perspectives do not fully explain how the academic identities of international students are formed through the interaction between cross-cultural adaptation, institutional legitimacy, competency certification, and self-transformation. Therefore, this study offers a conceptual repositioning that Arabic language competence should be understood as a social practice that connects linguistic capital, symbolic capital, and identity capital in an interrelated process. This perspective expands the discourse on faith-based higher education by showing that religious language learning is not only an instrument of knowledge transmission, but also a reproductive mechanism as well as a transformation of academic identity in the transnational education space.

The broader implications of these findings relate to the institutional transformation of Islamic higher education in the global era. It is not enough to strengthen Arabic language competence through the addition of language materials or the improvement of certification standards alone, but requires a learning ecosystem that is able to facilitate the process of cross-cultural adaptation, build an inclusive academic community, and integrate academic, spiritual, and professional dimensions simultaneously. This emphasizes that the agenda of internationalization of faith-based education is not only related to student mobility, but also to the ability of institutions to build spaces for identity negotiation that allow students to develop as global academic actors without losing their religious and cultural roots. In this context, the Arabic language transforms from a mere object of learning into a medium for the formation of academic legitimacy, social mobility, and transnational identity, thus showing how Islamic higher education can respond to global pressures without relinquishing its epistemological character and Islamic values.

Limitation

This study employs a narrative inquiry design and focuses exclusively on participants' construction of their subjective experiences. As such, it cannot fully explain the connections among three core elements: narrative experience, the development of measurable abilities, and the institutional factors that shape the formation of academic identity. Future research can adopt three types of integrated designs including the longitudinal mixed methods design, expand the sample to cover students from multiple countries and Islamic universities, objectively measure language proficiency, verify the dynamic changes in academic identity, and develop a comprehensive conceptual model for the Arabic language learning trajectories of international students

Conclusions

This study concludes that the Arabic learning trajectory of Thai international students at UIN Walisongo Semarang is not a linear process from course enrollment to graduation, but a transformational trajectory connecting academic adaptation, competency development, certification, and academic identity formation. Students initially encounter linguistic difficulties, unfamiliar learning practices, and psychological uncertainty, but sustained interaction with lecturers and peers, independent learning, digital resources, and engagement with the academic culture of an Islamic university gradually develop their linguistic competence, learning autonomy, communicative confidence, and psychological readiness. Importantly, Arabic language competency certification is not perceived merely as an evaluation tool or an administrative graduation requirement, but as a continuation and formal validation of competencies developed throughout the learning process. Certification consequently becomes a turning point through which students recognize and reassess themselves as increasingly competent and confident Arabic language users. The findings further demonstrate that certification transforms Arabic from a compulsory academic requirement into a form of multidimensional academic capital, encompassing linguistic competence, learning autonomy, communicative confidence, access to Islamic and academic literature, and the capacity to participate in academic interactions. Through this process, certification contributes not only to the recognition of language proficiency but also to the formation of an emerging academic identity in which students perceive themselves as more autonomous, competent, and legitimate participants in the academic community. The trajectory can therefore be conceptualized as adaptation → competency development → certification → identity formation → academic capital. This perspective challenges the narrow assumption that Arabic proficiency certificates function primarily as instruments of assessment or administrative pressure and instead positions certification as a transformative mechanism that connects language learning with identity formation and students' integration into the wider global academic community.

References

- Ahmad, S. Z., Buchanan, F. R., & Ahmad, N. (2016). Examination of students' selection criteria for international education. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 30(6), 1088-1103.
- Amir, A., & Amir, A. (2025). Islamic Education Quality Enhancement through Arabic-Medium International Class at Mahad Al Birr: Peningkatan Mutu Pendidikan Islam Melalui Kelas Internasional Berbahasa Arab di Mahad Al Birr. *SALIHA: Journal of Islamic Education*, 8(2), 364-380.
- Assegaf, A. R., Zainiyah, H. S., & Fahmi, M. (2022). Curriculum innovation for the internationalization of Islamic education study program at higher education institutions in Surabaya, Indonesia. *Millah: Journal of Religious Studies*, 671-706.
- Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 15(2), 219-234. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794112468475>
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241-258). Greenwood Press.
- Brown, P., Hesketh, A., & Williams, S. (2003). Employability in a knowledge-driven economy. *Journal of Education and Work*, 16(2), 107-126.
- Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Clandinin, D. J. (2013). *Engaging in narrative inquiry*. Routledge.
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. Jossey-Bass.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. SAGE Publications.

- Cudmore, G. (2005). Globalization, internationalization, and the recruitment of international students in higher education, and in the Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 35(1), 37-60.
- De Wit, H. (2019). Internationalization in higher education, a critical review. *SFU educational Review*, 12(3), 9-17.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2018). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2009). *The psychology of second language acquisition*. Oxford University Press.
- Guo, Y., & Guo, S. (2017). Internationalization of Canadian higher education: Discrepancies between policies and international student experiences. *Studies in Higher Education*, 42(5), 851-868.
- Jon, J. E. (2013). Realizing internationalization at home in Korean higher education: Promoting domestic students' interaction with international students and intercultural competence. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 17(4), 455-470.
- Jon, J. E. (2013). Realizing internationalization at home in Korean higher education: Promoting domestic students' interaction with international students and intercultural competence. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 17(4), 455-470.
- Kamal, H. (2025). Teaching Arabic today: Challenges, strategies, and opportunities in Islamic higher education. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, 24(10), 644-659.
- Knight, J. (2012). Student mobility and internationalization: Trends and tribulations. *Research in comparative and international education*, 7(1), 20-33.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE Publications.
- Marginson, S. (2014). Student self-formation in international education. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 18(1), 6–22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315313513036>
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Norton, B. (2013). *Identity and language learning: Extending the conversation* (2nd ed.). Multilingual Matters.
- Orb, A., Eisenhauer, L., & Wynaden, D. (2001). Ethics in qualitative research. *Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, 33(1), 93–96. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1547-5069.2001.00093.x>
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. SAGE Publications.
- Saldaña, J. (2021). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Saunders, B., Sim, J., Kingstone, T., Baker, S., Waterfield, J., Bartlam, B., Burroughs, H., & Jinks, C. (2018). Saturation in qualitative research: Exploring its conceptualization and operationalization. *Quality & Quantity*, 52(4), 1893–1907. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-017-0574-8>
- Sutrisno, A. (2019). Internationalization of Indonesian higher education: Recent initiatives and their problems. *International higher education*.
- Tinto, V. (2012). *Completing college: Rethinking institutional action*. University of Chicago Press.
- Tomlinson, M. (2017). Forms of graduate capital and their relationship to graduate employability. *Education + Training*, 59(4), 338–352. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ET-05-2016-0090>
- Urban, E. L., & Palmer, L. B. (2014). International students as a resource for internationalization of higher education. *Journal of studies in international education*, 18(4), 305-324.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wheelahan, L. (2015). Not just skills: What a focus on knowledge means for vocational education. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 47(6), 750–762