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Immersive Arabic Language Learning through Religious Tourism in the Mataraman Region: A Study of Islamic Higher Education Students

[1]Ahmad Nurcholis, [2]A. Samsul Ma'arif
[1]UIN Sayyid Ali Rahmatullah Tulungagung, Indonesia
[2]UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, Indonesia
[1]ahmadnurcholis@uinsatu.ac.id, [2]syamsulsyafa@uin-malang.ac.id

ABSTRACT: Arabic language learning in the Society 5.0 era calls for approaches that connect linguistic competence with authentic experience, spiritual reflection, and sociocultural understanding. Although immersive and experiential learning have been widely discussed, their integration with religious tourism and local Islamic heritage remains underexplored in Arabic language education. This qualitative educational ethnography examines the design and implementation of religious-tourism-based Arabic learning at UIN Sayyid Ali Rahmatullah Tulungagung and UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang. The study involved 45 students and 5 lecturers, selected purposively. Data were generated through participatory observation, reflective interviews, and digital documentation during June 2026. Thematic analysis identified two complementary institutional orientations: a spiritual-reflective, local-wisdom orientation in Tulungagung and a productive-communicative, digitally supported orientation in Malang. Across the accounts and observed activities described in the study, religious heritage settings provided contexts for contextual vocabulary use (mufradāt), speaking tasks (mahārah kalām), and the interpretation of historical-religious texts (mahārah qirā'ah). These findings indicate pedagogical opportunities for integrating language practice, reflection, and cultural meaning; they do not establish measured gains in language proficiency. The study proposes the Integrated Immersive Arabic Learning Ecosystem (IIALE), comprising Immersive Context, Experiential Process, Meaning Construction, and Communicative Production. The model offers a context-sensitive framework for designing religious-tourism-based Arabic learning in Islamic higher education.

Key words: *Arabic language education, experiential learning, immersive learning, religious tourism.*

INTRODUCTION

The evolution of language education in the 21st century calls for a fundamental shift from structure-oriented instruction toward approaches that place learning experiences at the core of the pedagogical process. Within the field of second language acquisition, language is increasingly understood not as an abstract system to be mastered in isolation, but as a social practice developed through interaction, negotiation of meaning, and engagement in authentic contexts. In this regard, meaningful learning environments are essential for developing communicative competence. Recent studies have demonstrated that immersive learning approaches can significantly enhance learners' cognitive and affective engagement, while also

improving retention and contextualized language use (Makransky & Petersen, 2021) (Huang et al., 2010) (Parmaxi, 2023)(Radianti et al., 2020)

In practice, immersive learning has often been associated with the integration of digital technologies such as virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and extended reality (XR). These technologies simulate real-life situations and allow learners to use language in environments that resemble authentic contexts. A growing body of research indicates that such approaches not only support linguistic development but also positively influence learners' motivation, confidence, and overall engagement (J. Chen et al., 2022)(Kaplan-Rakowski, 2022)(Wang et al., 2023)(Dooly & Sadler, 2021). However, technology-mediated immersion cannot fully reproduce the complexity of lived social and cultural experiences. This limitation creates an opportunity to examine forms of immersion grounded in real-world contexts (Ma'arif & Rosikh, 2025)

From this perspective, experiential learning offers a complementary framework by emphasizing direct experience as the foundation of meaningful learning. Knowledge develops not only through exposure to information but also through cycles of experience, reflection, and meaning-making. Social, cultural, and historical environments can thus function as living learning spaces, where language emerges as part of everyday practice rather than as an isolated subject of study. Empirical studies have shown that engagement in authentic contexts can enhance conceptual understanding, communicative competence, and reflective capacity among learners (Kolb & Kolb, 2017)(Yardley et al., 2022)(Morris, 1969)(Bergsteiner et al., 2010). However, the integration of language learning with local cultural and religious contexts remains underexplored, particularly in the field of Arabic language education (Hamim et al., 2024).

In the Indonesian context, Arabic holds a distinctive position as it is closely intertwined with religious practices, Islamic intellectual traditions, and the historical memory of Muslim communities. As such, Arabic language learning extends beyond communicative purposes and encompasses spiritual and cultural dimensions. The Mataraman region in East Java, with its rich landscape of religious heritage sites—including historical mosques, Islamic boarding schools, and the tombs of prominent scholars—offers a unique and underutilized setting for authentic language learning. These environments allow students to use Arabic while experiencing and interpreting meanings embedded in socio-religious practices. Despite this potential, such contexts have rarely been systematically integrated into theoretically grounded pedagogical models for Arabic language learning (Arifuddin et al., 2025).

Addressing this gap, this study examines how religious tourism and local Islamic heritage can function as authentic contexts for immersive Arabic language learning. It focuses on the learning designs and activities at UIN Sayyid Ali Rahmatullah

Tulungagung and UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, and on how students describe and interpret their learning experiences. The study is guided by three research questions: (1) How is religious-tourism-based immersive Arabic learning designed in the two institutions? (2) How are the learning activities implemented in authentic religious and cultural settings? (3) How do students describe their linguistic, reflective, and sociocultural experiences in these activities? The study aims to compare the two institutional implementations and to develop a conceptual framework grounded in their shared and distinctive features. Its novelty lies in bringing together real-world religious heritage, experiential learning, spiritual meaning-making, and communicative Arabic production within one framework. Rather than treating immersion solely as a technology-mediated environment, the study conceptualizes religious-tourism settings as lived sociocultural spaces for language learning.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with an educational ethnography design to gain an in-depth understanding of immersive Arabic language learning practices within their real social, cultural, and spiritual contexts. This approach supports an in-depth examination of learning experiences through the researcher's direct involvement in instructional activities and interactions with participants in their natural settings. Educational ethnography provides a robust framework for examining how pedagogical practices are shaped and interpreted within specific institutional and cultural contexts, making it highly relevant for investigating religious tourism-based learning as a contextualized educational phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2020; Huberman, 2009; Maarif, 2025; Madison, 2021).

The study was conducted at two Islamic higher education institutions, namely UIN Sayyid Ali Rahmatullah Tulungagung and UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang. These institutions were purposively selected because the manuscript examines their distinct approaches to Arabic instruction and field-based religious-tourism learning. Participants comprised students involved in the immersive learning activities and lecturers directly involved in their design or implementation. Participants were selected purposively on the basis of their direct experience of the activities. The study involved a total of [N] participants, comprising [n] students from UIN Sayyid Ali Rahmatullah Tulungagung, 45 students from UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, and 5 Arabic language lecturers from both institutions. The student participants were enrolled in [year/semester of study] and were selected based on their direct involvement in religious tourism-based Arabic language learning activities. Participants were included because they had relevant experience in the planning, implementation, or evaluation of the learning activities. Data were generated

through participatory observation, reflective interviews, and digital documentation. Participatory observation focused on students' language use, interaction, task completion, and reflection in religious-tourism settings. The activities described in the study included educational visits and reflective discussions linked to Islamic history in Tulungagung, as well as interviews, presentations, collaborative projects, video production, and field-based reporting in Malang. Reflective interviews explored participants' perceptions of these activities and the meanings they attached to language, heritage, and learning. Photographs, videos, and learning artifacts were used as contextual documentation and to support triangulation. Data collection was conducted over a period of 3 months, from May,2026 to Auguts, 2026. During this period, the researchers carried out 50 participatory observation visits at the two participating universities and conducted 50 reflective interviews with students and lecturers. The interviews were conducted in group format, either face-to-face, and lasted approximately 30 minutes per session. The field visits focused on observing students' participation, Arabic language use, interactions, and learning activities at
religious heritage sites.

Data analysis followed a thematic and reflective approach. The researchers first familiarized themselves with the observation notes, interview materials, and digital documentation through repeated reading and review. Initial codes were then assigned to meaningful segments relating to learning context, experiential activity, spiritual and cultural reflection, and communicative language use. Related codes were grouped into provisional themes, compared across the two institutional settings, and refined through repeated examination of the data. The resulting themes informed the comparison between the spiritual-reflective orientation at UIN Sayyid Ali Rahmatullah Tulungagung and the productive-communicative orientation at UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang. The analysis also informed the synthesis of the four IIALE components. The authors should ensure that the coding record or audit trail is retained so that this analytical process can be substantiated.

The study addressed trustworthiness through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was supported by comparing observation, interview, and documentary materials and, where conducted, by member checking. Transferability was addressed through descriptions of the two institutional contexts and the learning activities. Dependability and confirmability were supported by maintaining records of data collection, coding decisions, and the development of themes. The authors should retain only procedures that were actually implemented and specify who conducted member checking, when it occurred, and what records were maintained.

The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to confidentiality and ethical considerations. However, the data may be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request for academic and research purposes, subject to applicable confidentiality requirements and the protection of participants' identities.

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

Conceptual Design of Immersive Arabic Learning

The findings reveal that the conceptual design of immersive Arabic language learning in both institutions is grounded in an immersive–experiential learning paradigm, while reflecting distinct orientations shaped by institutional contexts and pedagogical priorities. These differences suggest that immersive learning is a flexible framework that can be adapted to different educational aims and can support varied forms of learner engagement and meaning-making.

In the case of UIN Sayyid Ali Rahmatullah Tulungagung, the learning design can be characterized as a spiritual-experiential local wisdom model, in which language learning is deeply embedded within the spiritual and cultural landscape of the Mataraman region. Religious heritage sites—such as the tombs of Islamic scholars, traditional pesantren, and historical mosques—are used as learning spaces in which students experience language rather than study it only in the classroom. In this setting, Arabic functions not only as a communicative tool but also as a medium for engaging with spiritual narratives, historical memory, and religious practices. This form of spiritual immersion enables students to internalize linguistic expressions alongside the values and meanings they carry (Mustofa et al., 2022)

From an experiential learning perspective, this model places a strong emphasis on reflective observation, as students are encouraged to contemplate their experiences, interpret symbolic meanings, and connect linguistic forms with spiritual insights. The learning process thus becomes contemplative and meaning-oriented, fostering a deeper level of engagement that transcends cognitive acquisition (Ma'arif, 2020). This aligns with the notion that meaningful learning emerges when learners are not only exposed to authentic contexts but also actively reflect upon them, leading to the internalization of both language and values. As a result, this model cultivates a humanistic and spiritually grounded learning experience, where language learning is intertwined with identity formation and ethical awareness.

In contrast, the learning design at UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang reflects an academic-digital immersive learning model, characterized by a stronger orientation toward active communication, academic productivity, and technological integration.

Religious tourism sites are utilized as field-based laboratories where students engage in structured tasks such as interviews, presentations, and project-based assignments. In this context, Arabic functions primarily as a medium of communication and knowledge production, enabling students to articulate observations, construct narratives, and collaborate in completing academic tasks.

This model places greater emphasis on active experimentation and abstract conceptualization within the experiential learning cycle. Students are encouraged to use language actively in real-time interactions, while also transforming their experiences into digital outputs such as educational vlogs, reports, and multimedia content. The integration of digital media not only enhances engagement but also expands the learning space beyond physical sites, allowing for broader dissemination and reflection. This approach supports a collaborative learning environment in which language learning is connected with creativity, performance, and digital literacy (Asrofik et al., 2025).

Taken together, these findings indicate that immersive Arabic learning can manifest in at least two complementary forms: one that prioritizes spiritual depth and reflective meaning-making, and another that emphasizes communicative performance and digital productivity. These orientations are complementary and indicate that immersive learning frameworks may integrate experiential, spiritual, and technological dimensions.

Implementation of Immersive Arabic Learning Based on Religious Tourism

The findings indicate that the implementation of immersive Arabic language learning based on religious tourism in both institutions creates an authentic, context-sensitive learning environment, albeit with distinct characteristics and pedagogical orientations. These differences concern the ways in which the principles of immersive–experiential learning are translated into instructional practices, rather than differences in quality. In this sense, both implementations represent complementary approaches to fostering immersive learning experiences.

At UIN Sayyid Ali Rahmatullah Tulungagung, the implementation takes the form of educational pilgrimage-based learning, where language use is closely integrated with spiritual experience and reflective engagement. Learning activities extend beyond site visits and function as meaning-oriented processes in which students interact directly with historical and religious environments. Arabic is used within a contemplative atmosphere, such as in prayers, historical narration, and reflective discussions about the values embedded in the visited sites. In this context, language serves not only as a communicative tool but also as a medium for experiencing and interpreting spiritual meaning.(Arifuddin et al., 2024)

Furthermore, the learning process incorporates storytelling based on local Islamic history, where students construct and retell historical narratives using simplified Arabic. This practice strengthens not only linguistic competence but also the connection between language, collective memory, and religious identity. The integration of language with religious practices and local cultural traditions forms a living curriculum, in which learning occurs organically through interaction with real-life contexts. This implementation therefore connects language learning with spiritual and cultural reflection in students' lived experiences.

In contrast, the implementation at UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang demonstrates a more structured approach through project-based learning oriented toward academic production and performance. Learning activities are designed as collaborative tasks, including video production, presentations, and academic reports derived from religious tourism exploration. In this context, students actively use Arabic in real communicative situations, such as conducting interviews, describing tourism objects, and constructing field-based narratives. Language is not only practiced but also transformed into tangible academic outputs (Arifuddin & Husna, 2022).

A defining feature of this model is its use of digital technology. Social media, vlogs, and digital platforms serve as tools for expression and dissemination. This technological integration enhances student engagement while extending the learning space beyond physical locations into broader digital environments. Additionally, collaborative learning fosters social interaction, meaning negotiation, and the development of linguistic performance within group dynamics. This implementation therefore creates an interactive and collaborative learning environment, in which language functions both as a means of communication and as a medium for knowledge production.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that immersive Arabic learning can be operationalized through two complementary pathways: one emphasizing spiritual-reflective experience, and the other focusing on productive-digital engagement (Sadiyah, 2018). Both approaches provide meaningful learning environments, with different emphases on reflection and linguistic expression. This suggests that the effectiveness of immersive learning lies not merely in the form of activities, but in the extent to which language is meaningfully connected to real-life experiences—whether in spiritual, social, or academic domains.

Students' Responses, Learning Experiences, and Reflections

The findings indicate that students in both institutions expressed generally positive responses to immersive Arabic learning through religious tourism. The character of these responses, however, differed in emphasis in ways that corresponded to each institution's pedagogical orientation. The comparison below is based on the

experiences and activities described in the qualitative materials; it should not be interpreted as a standardized measurement of language achievement.

At UIN Sayyid Ali Rahmatullah Tulungagung, students' responses reflect a predominantly spiritual and affective engagement with the learning process. Their experiences are characterized by a heightened sense of emotional and spiritual meaning, as language learning becomes intertwined with religious values and personal reflection. Students reported a growing awareness of the intrinsic connection between the Arabic language and Islamic teachings, perceiving the language not merely as a communicative system but as a vehicle for accessing and understanding religious knowledge. This shift in perception indicates a deeper level of internalization, where language learning transcends functional competence and becomes part of a broader spiritual journey.

Interview findings indicate that students at UIN Sayyid Ali Rahmatullah Tulungagung experienced religious tourism-based Arabic learning as an opportunity to connect language learning with spiritual reflection and local Islamic history. Their accounts highlighted a stronger awareness of the relationship between Arabic, Islamic teachings, and the historical legacy of religious scholars. Meanwhile, students at UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang emphasized the communicative and practical aspects of the learning activities. Participation in interviews, presentations, and digital content production provided opportunities to use Arabic in authentic contexts and was associated with greater confidence in communicating and expressing ideas. These findings illustrate how religious tourism can support different but complementary learning experiences, combining spiritual and historical reflection with communicative engagement and digital participation.

Furthermore, students demonstrated deep reflective engagement with local Islamic history and the legacy of religious scholars encountered during the learning activities. Through interaction with historical sites and narratives, they developed a stronger sense of cultural and religious identity, accompanied by an increased appreciation for local traditions. This process also fostered a sense of khidmah (devotional service) and respect toward religious heritage, suggesting that learning extended beyond cognitive and linguistic domains into ethical and attitudinal dimensions. Consequently, students in this context can be characterized as reflective-spiritual learners, who perceive language as a medium of devotion, identity formation, and civilizational continuity.

In contrast, students at UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang exhibited responses that emphasize active engagement, intellectual challenge, and communicative confidence. Their learning experiences were described as enjoyable, dynamic, and cognitively stimulating, particularly due to the integration of collaborative projects and

technology-mediated activities (Ma'arif, 2020). Students reported increased confidence in using Arabic for real-time communication, as they engaged in interviews, presentations, and digital content creation. These accounts suggest that immersive exposure and task-based learning may support communicative competence and help reduce language anxiety.

Additionally, students demonstrated reflective awareness of the role of Arabic in global and digital contexts, recognizing its relevance beyond religious domains. Their involvement in producing creative outputs, such as videos and digital narratives, further strengthened their motivation to use Arabic as a tool for expression and knowledge dissemination. This orientation reflects a shift toward viewing language as a functional and productive resource in contemporary communication (Suroiyah et al., 2024). As a result, students in this context can be identified as active-productive learners, who approach Arabic as a global communicative tool and a medium for creative and intellectual engagement.

Overall, the findings suggest that the two learning contexts foreground different but potentially complementary dimensions of learner experience. The Tulungagung case places greater emphasis on spiritual reflection, local history, and cultural identity, whereas the Malang case foregrounds communicative tasks, collaboration, and digital production. The qualitative evidence supports an interpretation of these experiences as opportunities for linguistic engagement and meaning-making; it does not establish causal or quantified effects on students' language proficiency.

Based on the overall findings encompassing conceptual design, instructional implementation, and students' responses, immersive Arabic language learning grounded in religious tourism can be conceptualized as a multidimensional learning ecosystem that extends beyond conventional pedagogical approaches. This finding aligns with recent scholarship that positions immersive learning as a dynamic system integrating experience, social interaction, and meaning construction within a unified learning process (Fannani et al., 2024; Huang et al., 2010; Makransky & Petersen, 2021; Parmaxi, 2023). While prior studies have predominantly emphasized technology-mediated environments such as virtual and augmented reality, the present study demonstrates that real-world religious and cultural contexts can serve as meaningful immersive environments that foster meaningful learning experiences.

The synthesis of findings reveals two complementary orientations: a reflective-spiritual dimension and a productive-communicative dimension. The reflective-spiritual dimension reinforces the core premise of experiential learning theory, which highlights reflection as a central mechanism for meaning-making (Kolb & Kolb, 2017; Yardley et al., 2022). Within this dimension, contemplative engagement enables learners to internalize values and develop a deeper sense of identity. In

contrast, the productive-communicative dimension supports findings from task-based language learning research, which emphasizes the importance of active language use in authentic contexts to enhance communicative competence (Dooly & Sadler, 2021; Ellis, 2022; Wang et al., 2023). Rather than existing as opposing approaches, this study demonstrates that both dimensions can be integrated into a cohesive pedagogical framework, and provides a basis for further theoretical development.

Building upon this integration, the study proposes a conceptual model termed the Integrated Immersive Arabic Learning Ecosystem (IIALE). This model consists of four interrelated components: (1) Immersive Context, referring to authentic learning environments as living learning spaces, consistent with the principles of situated learning, where knowledge is constructed through participation in social practice (Lave & Wenger, 2021; Van Lier, 2020); (2) Experiential Process, reflecting the cyclical nature of learning as conceptualized in experiential learning theory (Kolb & Kolb, 2017); (3) Meaning Construction, which involves the internalization of cultural, spiritual, and identity-related values, aligned with sociocultural perspectives on language learning (Kramsch, 2021); and (4) Communicative Production, emphasizing the use of language in real-world communication, collaboration, and knowledge production, as advocated in communicative and task-based approaches (Y. Chen et al., 2022; Ellis, 2022).

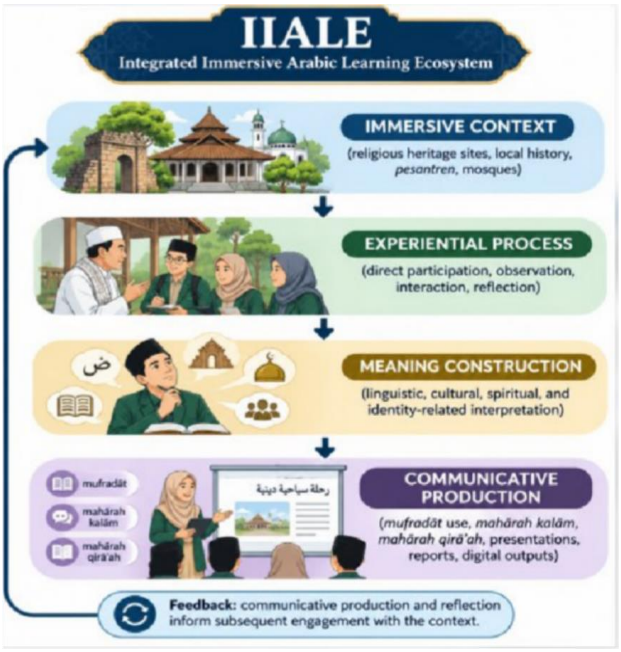


Figure 1. Conceptual structure of the Integrated Immersive Arabic Learning Ecosystem

The relationships among these components form a dynamic and cyclical system in which immersive experiences trigger reflection, reflection leads to meaning construction, and meaning is subsequently expressed through communicative action

and linguistic production. This pattern supports previous findings suggesting that immersive learning is most effective when it integrates experience, emotion, and action (Kaplan-Rakowski, 2022; Makransky & Petersen, 2021). The present study adds to this discussion by highlighting spiritual and local cultural dimensions in this process—an aspect that has been relatively underexplored in existing immersive language learning research.

From a theoretical standpoint, the Integrated Immersive Arabic Learning Ecosystem extends the discourse on language pedagogy by integrating immersive learning, experiential learning, and cultural-religious contexts into a unified conceptual framework. This contribution complements prior studies that have largely focused on technology as the primary medium of immersion (Y. Chen et al., 2022; Radianti et al., 2020), by showing how real-world experiences can also provide opportunities for immersion. Practically, this model suggests that Arabic language instruction in Islamic higher education should incorporate a balanced integration of spiritual, social, and digital dimensions in order to create learning environments that are relevant to the social, cultural, and digital contexts associated with Society 5.0.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study indicates that immersive Arabic language learning through religious tourism can connect language practice with authentic cultural contexts, spiritual reflection, and communicative activity. The comparison of the two institutions identifies two complementary orientations: a reflective-spiritual orientation and a productive-communicative orientation. These findings are qualitative interpretations of the learning experiences documented in the study, rather than evidence of measured gains in language proficiency.

A key contribution of this study lies in identifying two complementary orientations within immersive Arabic learning: the reflective-spiritual dimension and the productive-communicative dimension. The former emphasizes meaning-making, identity formation, and value internalization, while the latter highlights active language use, creativity, and communicative performance. These dimensions are not separate paradigms; they can work together by connecting reflection with language use. This finding supports an integrative perspective that accommodates both reflective and performance-oriented learning.

Building upon these findings, the study proposes the Integrated Immersive Arabic Learning Ecosystem (IIALE) as a conceptual model that synthesizes immersive context, experiential processes, meaning construction, and communicative production. This model contributes to the theoretical development of language education by extending

immersive learning beyond technology-driven environments and incorporating cultural-religious contexts as central components of the learning process. The framework therefore conceptualizes immersion as a lived experience situated in a specific cultural and educational context.

For Arabic language lecturers, the findings suggest three practical considerations. First, select religious-heritage sites that provide meaningful historical, cultural, and linguistic material. Second, prepare structured pre-visit, on-site, and post-visit tasks, including vocabulary preparation, guided observation, short interviews or oral descriptions, and reflective writing. Third, assess both the language process and the quality of students' reflection through transparent rubrics for mufradāt, mahārah kalām, mahārah qirā'ah, collaboration, and digital outputs. These are pedagogical implications derived from the two cases, not claims that every activity was implemented identically in both institutions.

This study has several limitations. First, it is confined to two Islamic higher education institutions and specific religious-tourism and cultural settings; its findings therefore should not be generalized to all Arabic language programs. Second, the qualitative design captures participants' experiences and observed practices but does not quantify changes in language proficiency or establish causal effects. Third, the manuscript's reporting of the sample profile, data-collection duration, and illustrative participant evidence must be completed with verified field records. Future research could test the applicability of IIALE in other regions, use longitudinal or mixed-method designs, and combine qualitative accounts with validated assessments of mufradāt, mahārah kalām, and mahārah qirā'ah.

In conclusion, religious-tourism-based immersive learning offers a context-sensitive approach for connecting Arabic language practice with cultural meaning and spiritual reflection. The IIALE framework provides a conceptual basis for designing such learning through the interrelated processes of context, experience, meaning construction, and communicative production.

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Declaration of AI Usage

The authors used ChatGPT to assist with language editing and grammatical proofreading. All AI-assisted content was carefully reviewed, revised, and verified by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to the research or publication of this article.

Data Availability Statement

The data used in this study are not publicly available due to ethical considerations, the confidentiality of participant information, and limitations regarding consent for data sharing and dissemination. However, interested parties may request access to the research data for academic purposes and further research by contacting the corresponding author via email. Requests will be considered subject to compliance with research ethics principles and the protection of participants' confidentiality.

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