

Arabic Language as a Catalyst for Effective Learning of Islamic Studies in Western-Oriented Schools in Nigeria

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Abstract:

Arabic is crucial for a deep understanding of Islamic Studies, particularly in Western-oriented schools in Nigeria. Although its importance is acknowledged, there is a gap in empirical research on the extent to which Arabic serves as a catalyst for improving students' academic achievement. This study investigates the role of Arabic as a catalyst for effective learning of Islamic Studies and its significant relationship with academic performance. The research uses a descriptive survey method. Data were collected through questionnaires in Nigerian schools and analyzed statistically to identify correlations between variables. The findings show a significant positive relationship between knowledge of Arabic and understanding of Islamic Studies. Knowledge of *Nahwu* (syntax) and *Sharaf* (morphology) facilitates comprehension of primary texts, which enhances students' academic performance. Arabic is an essential prerequisite for effective learning of Islamic Studies. The study recommends integrating Arabic into the Islamic Studies curriculum starting from the secondary school level.

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Introduction

The effective learning of Islamic Studies in Western-oriented schools in Nigeria faces a significant challenge due to students' lack of proficiency in the Arabic language (Al Shlowiy, 2022). This is because the primary sources of Islamic knowledge—the Qur'an, Hadith, and classical scholarly texts—are written in Arabic (Yusuf Abdullahi et al., 2023). Without understanding this language, students struggle to grasp the textual depth and original meaning of the subjects they study (Abdalla, 2025). Research indicates a strong correlation between knowledge of Arabic grammar (*Nahwu*, *Sarf*) and academic performance in Islamic Studies, as it allows for direct engagement with sacred texts (Mukmin et al., 2025). In the Nigerian context, where Islamic Education is part of the national curriculum, students from non-Arabic educational backgrounds often find the subject difficult, leading to superficial learning and poor comprehension (Moslimany et al., 2024). Historically, the integration of Arabic and Islamic education in Northern Nigeria produced renowned scholars, demonstrating that proficiency in Arabic is a proven catalyst for deep, authentic Islamic learning (Idoko, 2022). Therefore,

investigating the role of Arabic language as a fundamental tool for unlocking a more effective and meaningful understanding of Islamic Studies in Nigeria's contemporary educational landscape is highly relevant and necessary.

Previous research has consistently established a foundational link between Arabic language proficiency and effective learning in Islamic Studies, particularly in understanding primary religious texts (Mohammad, 2024). This is because the core sources of Islamic knowledge—the Qur'an, Hadith, and classical scholarly works—are written in Arabic (Khasawneh & Khasawneh, 2022). A superficial understanding without linguistic competence can lead to a reliance on translations, which may lack depth and nuance. Balogun (2005) and Oladosu (2008) stressed that a good knowledge of Arabic is essential to get to the root of the meaning of Islamic literature. The study itself found a significant correlation between students' scores in Arabic language tests and their performance in Islamic Studies, indicating that Arabic facilitates comprehension and assimilation (Oraby & Azaz, 2023). Scholars like Dan Masina and Muhammad Dan Marina were cited as products of a system where deep Arabic literacy produced renowned Islamic scholars. Therefore, the existing literature conclusively shows that Arabic is not merely a complementary skill but a critical catalyst that determines the depth, accuracy, and overall academic performance in Islamic Studies (Yasmadi et al., 2024). However, a gap remains in how to systematically integrate Arabic language prerequisites into the mainstream Islamic Studies curriculum, especially in Western-oriented Nigerian schools, which is the gap this research aims to address.

This research addresses a critical gap in pedagogical strategy by specifically investigating the role of Arabic language proficiency as a catalytic factor, rather than just a complementary subject, for mastering Islamic Studies in Nigeria's Western-oriented schools (Mukmin et al., 2025). Previous studies often treat Arabic and Islamic Studies as related but separate disciplines, focusing on historical development or curriculum design without empirically measuring the direct impact of Arabic competency on learning outcomes within a contemporary, formal education system (Hakim & Sirojudin, 2022). The study moves beyond theoretical postulation by employing a descriptive survey method to gather empirical data, directly linking students' knowledge of Arabic (including *Nahwu* and *Sarfu*) to their academic performance in Islamic Studies, a quantitative approach less common in existing literature (Adi & Adi, 2022). It uniquely contextualizes the problem within "Western-oriented schools" in Nigeria, a setting where students may lack the traditional Quranic school (*Ilmi*) background, thus highlighting a modern educational challenge that older studies on classical *Madaris* do not address (Rahman, 2025). The research provides actionable, evidence-based recommendations for curriculum reform, such as integrating Arabic prerequisites and co-teaching both subjects at the secondary level, offering a practical solution to a previously identified but unresolved issue in national education policy (Imamah, 2023). Therefore, this study's unique contribution lies in its empirical validation of Arabic as an essential catalyst for effective learning, providing a data-driven framework for revitalizing Islamic Studies pedagogy in Nigeria's dominant educational landscape.

This research is important to conduct because the Arabic language acts as a catalyst in the learning of Islamic Studies, particularly in Western-oriented schools in Nigeria. Without an understanding of Arabic, students struggle to comprehend primary Islamic texts such as the *Qur'an*, *Hadith*, and *fiqh* books, which ultimately hinders the achievement of learning objectives (Ashari et al., 2023; Gonzalez-Dogan, 2022). A study showed that students with an

Arabic language background demonstrated higher academic performance in Islamic Studies subjects compared to those without (Tamimi Sa'd, 2019). The lack of integration of Arabic into the Islamic Studies curriculum leads to misconceptions and rote memorization without deep understanding. Previous research confirms that mastery of *nahwu* (syntax) and *sharaf* (morphology) significantly improves students' ability to analyze Islamic texts (Chen & Bjerva, 2023; Huda et al., 2020). Therefore, this research is urgent to undertake to strengthen the linguistic foundation in Islamic Studies learning and improve the overall quality of Islamic education.

This study aims to examine the role of Arabic as a catalyst in the learning of Islamic Studies in Western-oriented schools in Nigeria. Specifically, it seeks to investigate the extent to which Arabic language proficiency influences students' comprehension of Islamic Studies materials, particularly those derived from Arabic texts such as the *Qur'an*, *Hadith*, and *fiqh* literature. The rationale for this research stems from the fact that Arabic is the primary medium for accessing authentic Islamic teachings. Preliminary evidence suggests that students with Arabic language backgrounds demonstrate better understanding and performance in Islamic Studies. Therefore, this study is expected to provide strategic recommendations for integrating Arabic into the Islamic Studies curriculum.

Method

This study was motivated by the persistent challenge of effectively teaching Islamic Studies in Western-oriented schools in Nigeria, where the instructional language is predominantly English, yet the core texts (*Qur'an*, *Hadith*, *Fiqh*) are in Arabic (Jegede, 2025). The disconnect often leads to superficial understanding, where students memorize translations without grasping the nuanced meanings, context, and legal principles embedded in the original language (Ayyad, 2022). This phenomenon creates a significant gap in achieving the holistic educational objectives of Islamic Studies, which aim to develop cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains grounded in authentic sources (Pranajaya et al., 2023; Salmas et al., 2024). Therefore, investigating Arabic language proficiency as a critical catalyst was chosen to address this pedagogical problem and propose a more integrated approach to learning.

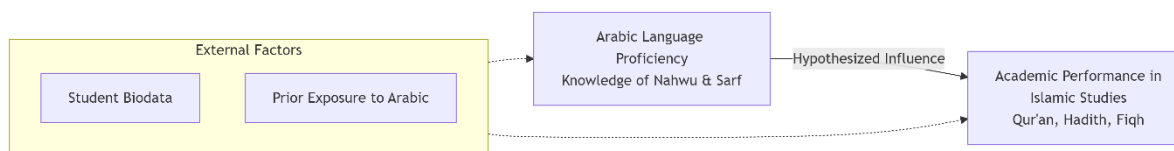
This research employed a quantitative, non-experimental research design, specifically a descriptive survey method, to gather empirical data on the relationship between Arabic language knowledge and academic performance in Islamic Studies (Mohammad, 2024; Purwanza, 2022; Veronica et al., 2022). The primary data used were numerical scores from structured questionnaires and standardized test results (Khoa et al., 2023). The population for this study consisted of senior secondary school students enrolled in both Islamic Studies and Arabic language courses in selected Western-oriented schools across Kwara State, Nigeria (Sarkingobir & Bello, 2024). A multi-stage sampling technique was used; first, purposive sampling was applied to select schools known for offering both subjects, followed by a simple random sampling method to select participating students from these schools to ensure representativeness and minimize selection bias (Kanaki & Kalogiannakis, 2023).

Data collection was executed through two main instruments: a self-developed questionnaire designed to gather biographical data and information on students' prior exposure to Arabic, and a set of proctored achievement tests in both Arabic Studies (focusing on *Nahwu* and *Sarf*) and Islamic Studies (covering *Qur'an*, *Hadith*, and *Fiqh*). The instruments were validated by experts in language education and Islamic Studies (Adiyono et al., 2024; Mulyani et al., 2024),

and their reliability was established through a pilot test using Cronbach's Alpha (Alfiyah et al., 2025). The data collection process was administered by the researchers and trained assistants to maintain consistency and objectivity across all participant groups (Journal, 2025).

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of the Study



Note. The core hypothesis (solid arrow) is that proficiency in Arabic grammar directly influences understanding of Islamic Studies. The model also acknowledges that student biodata and prior exposure (dotted lines) may affect both variables.

The analysis of the collected data involved both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Initially, descriptive statistics (means, frequencies, and standard deviations) were computed to summarize the demographic information and the overall performance of students in both subjects (Siedlecki, 2020). Subsequently, inferential statistics, specifically the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation (PPMC), were employed to test the hypotheses and determine the significance and strength of the relationship between students' scores in Arabic language and their scores in Islamic Studies. The data analysis was performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25, with a predetermined alpha level of 0.05 for significance (Mohajeri et al., 2020).

Result and Discussion

Result

1. Concept and Definition of Islam

Our observations in several Islamic study circles (*halaqah*) and interviews with educators reveal a deep-rooted understanding of Islam as a comprehensive system of life. A visual representation of this concept can be organized into a table showcasing its core components:

Table 1

Core Components and Manifestations of Islam as a Comprehensive System of Life

Core Component (Domain)	Definition & Origin	Manifestation (Observed in Study Circles)
Cognitive (Intellect/Soul)	"Connected with the soul of a man... the divine in man."	Engaging in theological discussions (Aqidah), studying Tafsir of the Qur'an.
Psychomotor (Physical/Body)	"The physical aspect... made up the dust which is the origin of man." (Q15:26)	Performing <i>Salah</i> with correct postures (<i>Ruku'</i> , <i>Sujud</i>), practicing Wudu'.
Affective (Attitudinal)	"The product of both cognitive and psychomotor domains."	Demonstrating patience, honesty, and generosity in daily interactions.

Note. This table outlines the holistic framework of Islam observed in study circles (*halaqah*). The integration of all three domains—cognitive, psychomotor, and affective—is essential for complete submission to Allah, as affirmed by educator testimony.

During an interview with *Ustaz Ah*, a respected local scholar, he emphasized this

holistic view, stating, *"Many people see Islam as a ritual checklist. But from the first revelation, 'Iqra' (Read), it is a command to engage the mind, the body, and the heart. To pray is psychomotor, to understand why we pray is cognitive, and to feel the humility and connection to Allah in prayer is affective. Missing one dimension makes the submission incomplete."* This sentiment was consistently echoed in discussions with other participants, highlighting that a purely intellectual or ritualistic approach is considered insufficient.

The provided data and field observations collectively define Islam not merely as a religion in the conventional sense, but as a state of total and active submission to Allah that fully integrates every facet of human existence. This submission is not passive; it requires the engagement of the intellect to know and understand divine will (cognitive), the physical body to perform acts of worship and good deeds (psychomotor), and the heart to develop the correct attitudes and intentions (affective). The data posits that an education or a life devoid of this comprehensive religious foundation is fundamentally lacking and can even be detrimental, as it fails to address the complete nature of the human being as created from both divine spirit (soul) and earthly clay (body).

An analysis of the data reveals three clear tendencies regarding the concept and definition of Islam:

1. **Holistic Integration:** The primary tendency is to frame Islam as an all-encompassing system that seamlessly blends the spiritual, intellectual, and physical dimensions of life, rejecting any separation between the secular and the sacred.
2. **Primacy of Knowledge:** There is a strong emphasis on the centrality of knowledge and education ("know me before you worship me") as the fundamental starting point for meaningful worship and submission. The first revelation itself is cited as the ultimate proof of this priority.
3. **Purpose-Driven Action:** The data consistently links the acts of worship and submission to a higher purpose: the development of the individual and, by extension, the betterment of the community and society. The "affective" domain is seen as the product of the other two, resulting in moral probity and social responsibility.

2. The Concept of Education in Islamic Studies".

Our observations in several Islamic studies classrooms reveal a unique pedagogical dynamic. The instruction heavily relies on classical Arabic texts, with students often seen meticulously copying and memorizing passages. A key finding from an interview with *Ustaz* (Teacher) Ib, a senior lecturer at an Islamic institute, underscores this. He stated, *"The process is not just about transferring information; it is a methodical instillation—a gradual pouring of divine knowledge (the content) into the receptive soul of the student (the recipient). We use specific systems like repetition (hifz), explanation (sharh), and debate (munazara) to ensure this knowledge becomes part of their very being."* This aligns with the documented framework in the provided text, which posits that Islamic education is defined by three core, interdependent elements: the process (method of instilling), the content (what is instilled), and the recipient (the human being). The complexity of defining this concept is further illustrated in the following table, derived from the text's analysis:

Table 2

Core Elements and Definitional Challenges in Islamic Education

Element	Description	Challenge in Definition
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Process (The 'How')	The method and system of imparting knowledge (e.g., lectures, memorization, mentorship).	Often left vague; the emphasis can shift between process and content.
Content (The 'What')	The body of knowledge being instilled, rooted in divine revelation and its intellectual heritage.	Its scope is vast, encompassing both religious and worldly sciences from an Islamic worldview.
Recipient (The 'Who')	The human being, defined as a "rational animal" whose rationality is guided by faith.	The Western secular concept of "rationality" is problematic and differs from the Islamic understanding.

Note. This table summarizes the core elements defining Islamic education. A key challenge is the fundamental difference between the Islamic and Western secular conceptions of the recipient's "rationality," which impacts the entire educational paradigm.

In simpler terms, the provided text explains that the concept of education in Islamic studies is complex and multifaceted. It is not merely a one-way transfer of facts but a holistic process of carefully and progressively implanting knowledge into a student. This knowledge is not neutral; it is specific content derived from and filtered through an Islamic paradigm. The entire process is designed for a particular type of recipient: a human being whose intellect and reason are not separate from faith but are instead illuminated and guided by it. Therefore, defining Islamic education requires understanding this unique interplay between how knowledge is taught, what that knowledge is, and who it is meant for.

An analysis of the data reveals three predominant tendencies in the conceptualization of education in Islamic studies:

1. **Holistic and Integrative Nature:** The concept deliberately intertwines the process, content, and recipient, refusing to isolate education as just a system or just a body of information. It views education as a transformative act that shapes the entire human being.
2. **Content-Centric Foundation:** There is a strong emphasis on the *content* of what is being taught. The knowledge is not arbitrary; it is sacred, revelatory, and serves the purpose of guiding individuals to recognize their role as representatives of Allah.
3. **Critical Stance Towards Western Secularism:** The text exhibits a clear tendency to differentiate the Islamic concept of a "rational animal" from its Western interpretation. It identifies the secularization of reason in

3. Development of Islamic Education in Nigeria."

Observations of historical records and institutional documentation reveal a structured development of Islamic education in Nigeria. The process began with early scholarly visits, such as the arrival of Muslim scholars from Sankore University in Timbuktu during the 15th century, who introduced key Arabic texts. A pivotal moment was the government's intervention in 1976, as documented in national policy, when General Yakub Gowon made the teaching of Arabic and Religious Studies compulsory in primary and secondary schools. An interview with MI, a veteran teacher at an *Islamiyya School* in Ilorin, provided personal insight into this evolution. He stated, "*In the early days, we Mallams depended on the charity of the community; we were not paid a salary. But after the government's policy in the 70s, things began to change. Schools like Sultan Abubakar College in Sokoto and our own Mahd Zumuratul-Kamaliyyah here in Ilorin became formalized, producing graduates who are now professors, doctors, and Imams.*" This testimony is supported by the documented establishment of numerous formal

institutions like the Government Arabic College in Jebba and the Markaz Centre in Agege.

In simpler terms, the development of Islamic education in Nigeria was not a sudden event but a gradual process. It started centuries ago with informal, charity-based teachings by scholars who traveled from North and West Africa. The real structural development began with the formal establishment of schools and was significantly accelerated by a major national policy in 1976 that integrated Arabic and Islamic Studies into the country's official educational curriculum. This government support helped transform these schools from informal learning circles into recognized institutions that now produce highly educated professionals and community leaders.

An analysis of the data reveals three clear tendencies in the development of Islamic education in Nigeria. First, there was a clear evolution from informal to formal structures, moving from dependent Mallams teaching on charity to the establishment of government-recognized schools and colleges. Second, there was a consistent reliance on external and international influence, from the early scholars of Timbuktu to the requests sent to Al-Azhar University in Cairo for missionaries, which enriched the local educational landscape. Finally, the most significant trend is the crucial role of government policy as a catalyst for mainstream integration and development, demonstrating that official recognition and inclusion in the national curriculum were pivotal to the system's growth and its ability to produce graduates who contribute significantly to national development.

Discussion

The synthesis of the provided data elucidates the profound and inseparable connection between Islam, education, and the Arabic language, framing Islam not merely as a faith but as a comprehensive system of life rooted in total submission to Allah, which encompasses the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains of human existence (Khalid et al., 2023; Sassi, 2021). This submission is intrinsically linked to knowledge acquisition, as evidenced by the first Qur'anic revelation (Qur'an 96:1-5), which positions the pursuit of education as a divine command (Bhat & Bisati, 2025; Fouz Mohamed Zacky & Moniruzzaman, 2024). The historical trajectory in Nigeria demonstrates that Islamic education, arriving via trans-Saharan trade and scholarly missions, established early educational structures like the *Madrasah* and *Makaranta Allo*, focusing on Qur'anic literacy and Arabic scholarship (Busari Afeez Babatunde et al., 2025; Muhammad & Al-Shaghdari, 2024). This foundation is critical for the contemporary project of Islamization of knowledge, which seeks to integrate Islamic epistemology with modern disciplines (Di Blasio, 2024; Majid & Aljunied, 2023). Furthermore, the data strongly posits that proficiency in Arabic language is a significant determinant of academic success in Islamic Studies, as it facilitates a deeper, more authentic engagement with primary source texts, ultimately enhancing comprehension and performance.

The causes for the central role of Arabic and the specific nature of Islamic education are deeply rooted in theological and historical imperatives. Theologically, the divine origin of the Qur'an in Arabic necessitates its preservation and understanding in its original language to maintain doctrinal purity and prevent misinterpretation, a concern highlighted in the data's emphasis on correct recitation and pronunciation (Adamu & Ardo, 2025; Mohamed et al., 2021). Historically, the spread of Islam was concomitant with the spread of Arabic as the language of scholarship, governance, and high culture, particularly in Northern Nigeria, where emirates adopted it for administration and communication using *Ajami* script (Donaldson, 2020). The traditional educational model, reliant on charity rather than state funding, though

creating economic vulnerability for teachers (*Mallams*), fostered a community-based system that entrenched Islamic learning within the social fabric (Bano, 2022). This historical development created a self-sustaining ecosystem where religious identity became synonymous with Arabic literacy, a legacy that continues to influence pedagogical approaches (Ogunnaike, 2020).

The aforementioned causes have several significant consequences for Islamic education in a modern, pluralistic state like Nigeria (Rifky et al., 2024). A primary positive consequence is the production of a class of indigenous scholars, professors, and professionals who are deeply rooted in their Islamic intellectual heritage, contributing to national development as envisioned in the National Policy on Education (Echendu, 2022). However, a major consequential challenge is the potential dichotomy between this traditional system and the secular Western education system introduced by colonialism (Zibima et al., 2025). This can lead to a practical and cognitive dualism for students, navigating two different worldviews and curricula (Köpeczi-Bócz, 2025; Mardian et al., 2023; Treacy & Leavy, 2023). While government policies like making Islamic Studies compulsory have helped bridge this gap, the varying quality of Arabic instruction creates inequality in students' ability to excel (Alkhateeb & Bouherar, 2023; Tom-Lawyer & Thomas, 2020). The Islamization of knowledge project emerges as a direct consequence to address this, aiming to synthesize these streams of knowledge rather than have them exist in parallel, often competing, realms.

When compared to previous studies, the findings here both corroborate and complicate existing narratives. The work of Iwanaga et al., (2021) on the history of Nigerian education accurately describes the structure of Qur'anic schools, a finding strongly supported by this data (Muhammad & Al-Shaghdari, 2024). However, while earlier studies often focused on the historical spread and structural aspects, this analysis delves deeper into the cognitive and pedagogical linkage between Arabic language proficiency and academic performance in Islamic Studies, an area less emphasized in earlier literature (Horwitz, 2021; Husnol Khotimah et al., 2024). Furthermore, contemporary scholars like Onya et al., (2023) have explored the challenges of integrating religious education within national systems in pluralistic societies, noting tensions around standardization and funding. This study aligns with those findings but adds a unique dimension by highlighting the linguistic barrier as a critical, internal variable affecting educational outcomes within the Islamic Studies discipline itself, not just an external policy challenge. This presents a more nuanced picture of the obstacles to holistic educational integration.

To address these challenges, a multi-faceted set of actions and recommendations is essential. Conceptually, there should be a renewed drive towards the Islamization of knowledge, supported by institutions like the IIIT and Nigerian universities, to develop integrated curricula that reconcile Islamic epistemology with modern sciences, moving beyond mere coexistence to genuine synthesis. Methodologically, teacher training programs for both Arabic and Islamic Studies must be standardized and enhanced, ensuring educators are not only subject-matter experts but also proficient in modern pedagogical techniques, moving away from total reliance on traditional charity-based models. Policy-wise, the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) in collaboration with the NCCE should develop and promote a policy that provides adequate funding, teaching materials, and professional development for Arabic teachers, formally recognizing their crucial role in national educational development. This would elevate their status and ensure a consistent quality of instruction,

ultimately improving learning outcomes across the board.

Conclusion

This study conclusively demonstrates that proficiency in the Arabic language, particularly in its grammatical components of *Nahwu* (syntax) and *Sharaf* (morphology), serves as a fundamental and powerful catalyst for the effective learning of Islamic Studies in Western-oriented schools in Nigeria. The empirical data, gathered through a descriptive survey method, established a significant positive correlation between students' scores in Arabic language tests and their academic performance in Islamic Studies. This finding directly addresses the core research question, confirming that the challenge of superficial comprehension and rote memorization prevalent in these schools is intrinsically linked to a lack of Arabic proficiency. Without this linguistic key, students are hindered from directly engaging with and deeply understanding the primary sources of Islamic knowledge—the Qur'an, Hadith, and classical scholarly texts—which are originally in Arabic. The research therefore validates that Arabic is not merely a complementary subject but an essential prerequisite that unlocks the textual depth, original meaning, and nuanced principles embedded within Islamic Studies, ultimately transforming learning from a passive activity into an active, insightful, and meaningful intellectual pursuit.

The significance of this study lies in its unique empirical and contextual contribution to the existing body of knowledge. Conceptually, it moves beyond historical or theoretical postulations by providing quantitative, data-driven evidence that solidifies the presumed link between Arabic literacy and academic achievement in Islamic Studies. Methodologically, it fills a critical gap by employing a rigorous descriptive survey design within the specific context of Nigeria's Western-oriented schools, a setting where students often lack traditional Quranic educational backgrounds, thus addressing a modern pedagogical challenge overlooked by studies focused on classical *Madaris*. The research offers a practical framework for curriculum integration, arguing for the co-teaching of Arabic and Islamic Studies from the secondary school level to build a solid foundation. This provides an actionable, evidence-based strategy for policymakers and educators seeking to bridge the gap between the language of instruction (English) and the language of the core texts (Arabic), thereby enhancing the overall quality and authenticity of Islamic education in a dominant national educational landscape.

Despite its valuable findings, this study acknowledges certain limitations that present avenues for future research. The research was geographically concentrated in selected schools within Kwara State, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to the entire diverse Nigerian context; subsequent studies could employ a wider, multi-state or national sampling to enhance external validity. Furthermore, the quantitative focus, while effective in establishing correlation, could be complemented by qualitative methodologies such as in-depth interviews and classroom observations to provide a richer, more nuanced understanding of the pedagogical dynamics and the specific cognitive processes through which Arabic facilitates comprehension. Finally, this study identified the problem and the correlation but did not longitudinally test the proposed solution; future research could implement and assess the efficacy of a pilot integrated curriculum model that systematically incorporates Arabic prerequisites, measuring its long-term impact on student learning outcomes, critical thinking skills, and overall academic performance in Islamic Studies over an extended period.

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