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Motivation of Cambodian and Thai International Students in Choosing Indonesia as a Place to Study the Arabic Language

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ABSTRACT: *This research explores why Cambodian and Thai students choose Indonesia to study Arabic, despite linguistically authentic Arab countries. Using narrative inquiry, data were collected through group discussions with eight international students studying in Indonesia for two years. Three main factors influenced their decision: quality Arabic programs, affordable education costs, and cultural similarities with shared Islamic values. Students found Indonesia's contextual pedagogical approach more relevant to their culture than traditional Arab methods. Challenges included adapting to language differences, educational systems, and limited exposure to native Arabic speakers. To address these issues, the study recommends integrating modern learning technologies, enhancing teacher competencies, and creating immersion programs that connect students with native Arabic speakers in Indonesia. These insights aim to improve Arabic language education for international students and bolster Indonesia's position as a hub for Islamic education in Southeast Asia.*

Keywords: international students, learning Arabic, motivation, Southeast Asia.

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INTRODUCTION

Research on the linguistic needs and motivations of international students in learning the Arabic language has made significant contributions; however, there are still gaps that need to be addressed, particularly concerning students from predominantly Buddhist countries. Most existing studies have primarily focused on non-Arab students in Arab countries or the challenges faced by Arab students in countries like the United States (Khasawneh, 2022; Phan & Coxhead, 2015). For instance, research by Husein et al. (Husein et al., 2023) demonstrates that the motivation and attitudes of students in Indonesia toward learning Arabic are influenced by their local context. Nevertheless, studies exploring the motivations of international students from predominantly Buddhist countries, such as Thailand and Cambodia, to learn Arabic in non-Arab countries like Indonesia remain extremely limited. This issue is important to explore, considering the complex social, political, and religious dynamics in Southeast Asia, including conflicts in Southern Thailand's Patani region and the discrimination against the Rohingya in Myanmar.

In this context, this study aims to explore the motivations of international students from Thailand and Cambodia in choosing Indonesia as a destination to study the Arabic language. Both countries have a majority population that follows the Buddhist religion, with 93% in Thailand and 97% in Cambodia (Phan & Coxhead, 2015). The primary focus of this research is to identify the factors influencing students from these two nations' decisions to study Arabic in Indonesia, as well as the challenges they face during their educational journey. A deeper understanding of their motivations will provide valuable insights into whether academic, cultural, or religious reasons drive their decisions. Furthermore, identifying the challenges faced by these students will assist educational institutions in understanding their specific needs, enabling them to design programs that support Arabic language learning while fostering mutual understanding and respect among students from diverse backgrounds (Ruslan et al., 2024).

In its analysis, this study will use the lens of Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, which emphasizes that every individual has basic needs that must be met before reaching a higher level of psychological and social fulfillment. This includes the need for safety, social acceptance, and self-actualization, which are very relevant when they face the challenges of adapting to a new environment (Maslow & Lewis, 1987). This study also aims to explore how negative stereotypes and interfaith bias in language learning can be mitigated through an inclusive education approach that not only accommodates diversity but also actively fosters positive interactions between groups. The findings of this study

are expected to provide a strategic foundation for the development of educational policies that are more sensitive to the needs of international students, especially in the Southeast Asia region. The relevance of this study is increasingly evident considering the increasing mobility of international students in the current era of globalization (Hamdani, 2024; Zainuri & Amal, 2023).

METHOD

The research aimed to analyze the motivations of students from Cambodia and Thailand in choosing Indonesia as a destination for studying Arabic, grounded in an interpretative research paradigm. This study employs a qualitative approach and a narrative inquiry design, which allows the researcher to delve into the profound experiences, perspectives, and personal narratives of the participants. By focusing on individual experiences, narrative inquiry provides a framework for understanding the contextual and subjective reasons behind the participants' motivations (Anfas et al., 2023; Larasati & Mayagita, 2021). Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews with focus groups, comprising two groups: the first group included five students from Thailand, while the second group consisted of five students from Cambodia.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face to foster a more personal interaction and facilitate a deeper exploration of the narratives. This method aligns with qualitative research principles, which emphasize the importance of direct engagement with participants to gather rich, detailed data (Condoy et al., 2024; Larasati & Mayagita, 2021). The interviews were recorded with the participants' prior consent, ensuring transparency and adherence to ethical research standards. The first group's interview session lasted for 75 minutes, while the second session extended to 86 minutes, allowing participants ample time to share their stories without the pressure of time constraints. All interviews were conducted in English to accommodate the varying language skills of the participants. The recorded data were subsequently transcribed and translated into Indonesian to facilitate the data analysis process. This approach aims to yield in-depth and meaningful findings regarding the factors that motivate students from both countries to select Indonesia as their destination for studying Arabic. The study's design and methodology are crucial in capturing the complexities of the participants' motivations and experiences, contributing to a broader understanding of international student dynamics in language education (Anfas et al., 2023; Larasati & Mayagita, 2021).

Narrative inquiry in this study was operationalized through the collection and analysis of personal stories and lived experiences related to the participants' motivations for choosing Indonesia as a destination for studying Arabic. The narratives obtained were primarily experiential, contextual, and temporal, reflecting the individual journeys of Thai and Cambodian students. These narratives were analyzed using both thematic narrative analysis and structural narrative analysis. Thematic analysis involved identifying recurring patterns and meanings within the stories, such as cultural affinity, religious motivation, and

future career opportunities (Riessman, 2008). Structural analysis, on the other hand, focused on how the stories were constructed, identifying elements such as setting, conflict, turning points, and resolution, to better understand the chronological flow of participants' decision-making processes (Labov & Waletzky, 1997). Purposive sampling was used to select five students from Thailand and five from Cambodia to ensure sufficient representation while maintaining feasibility and depth of data collection.

Table 1: Demographics of Participants

No	Initial	Country of Origin	University Origin	Study Program
1	TH1	Thailand	UIN WS	Bachelor of Arabic Language
2	TH2	Thailand	UIN WS	Bachelor of Arabic Language
3	TH3	Thailand	UIN WS	Bachelor of Arabic Language
4	TH4	Thailand	UIN WS	Bachelor of Arabic Language
5	TH5	Thailand	UIN WS	Bachelor of Arabic Language
6	CM1	Cambodia	UIN WS	Bachelor of Arabic Language
7	CM2	Cambodia	UIN WS	Bachelor of Arabic Language
8	CM3	Cambodia	UIN IB	Bachelor of Arabic Language
9	CM4	Cambodia	UIN IB	Bachelor of Arabic Language
10	CM5	Cambodia	UIN IB	Bachelor of Arabic Language

This sample size allowed for meaningful comparison between the two groups without overextending research resources. Data saturation was achieved when no new themes emerged from the interviews, indicating that the data had reached a point of theoretical sufficiency (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). However, the generalizability of the findings remains limited due to the small, context-specific sample typical of qualitative research. To enhance trustworthiness, strategies for qualitative rigor were applied: credibility was ensured through prolonged engagement, triangulation, and member checking; dependability was maintained by documenting the research process systematically; confirmability was strengthened through an audit trail reviewed by an independent researcher; and transferability was supported by providing thick descriptions of the research context, enabling readers to assess the applicability of findings to other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The data validation technique in this research was conducted through triangulation, which includes source and method triangulation, to ensure the accuracy and consistency of data obtained from interviews. Triangulation aims to enhance the validity and reliability of research findings by confirming or complementing results from various sources or perspectives (Carter et al., 2014; Donkoh, 2023). In this process, interview data were compared across informants and confirmed through direct observation and supporting documents, such as curricula and learning programs offered (Fusch et al., 2018). Data analysis followed the steps proposed by Miles and Huberman, specifically data reduction, data presentation, and concluding. In the data reduction stage, complex interview data were filtered and categorized into main themes, such as economic factors, education quality, and cultural diversity (Renz et al., 2018). Data presentation was carried out by creating tables and graphs that illustrated the distribution of student motivations. Most Cambodian students emphasized cost factors, while Thai students prioritized the quality of Arabic language education (Campbell et al., 2018). Conclusion drawing involved observing emerging patterns, such as the influence of religious values in Indonesia, which attracted both groups of students, thereby enabling a more holistic analysis of motivation and highlighting the connection between students' socio-cultural backgrounds and their preferences in choosing Indonesia as a place to study the Arabic language (Abdalla et al., 2018).

RESULTS

Motivation of International Students from Thailand

This research found that the primary motivation influencing the decision of international students from Thailand to study Arabic in Indonesia is significantly shaped by several key factors. Thai students feel that the availability of quality Arabic language study programs in Indonesia, offered at more affordable tuition costs compared to other countries, is a major attraction. Additionally, the cultural similarities and shared Islamic values between Indonesia and Thailand provide a sense of comfort and familiarity in their learning process. They appreciate the humanistic and contextually relevant approach to Arabic language education in Indonesia, as this method helps them understand Arabic in relation to their daily lives and the Islamic values they adhere to. Another supporting factor in their decision is the presence of a large Thai student community at several universities in Indonesia, which makes them feel they have a support network that aids in both social and academic adaptation. Compared to studying in Arab countries, they consider Indonesia to offer a more inclusive and diverse, supportive learning environment. Thai students also find that the teaching methods applied in Indonesia, which integrate communicative and contextual approaches, are much easier to grasp compared to overly formal traditional methods. This allows them to master Arabic practically, both for academic purposes and everyday life, enabling them to achieve their educational goals more effectively.

Thai students who choose Indonesia as their destination for studying Arabic revealed that their decision is based on a combination of high academic quality

and affordability. Respondent TH1 mentioned, "In Indonesia, I can receive a quality education without having to pay exorbitant fees like in other countries" (TH1). This is supported by various scholarship programs offered by Indonesian universities, easing the financial burden. TH2 acknowledged, "Universities in Indonesia provide many scholarships, which make us feel financially relieved." Besides cost, academic considerations are also significant reasons. Respondent TH3 highlighted the strengths of study programs in Indonesia, stating, "We feel that the Arabic program at UIN Walisongo offers a balance between theory and practice, which is very helpful." Moreover, the significant difference in travel expenses adds to the appeal. TH4 shared their experience, saying, "Airfare from Bangkok to Jakarta is much cheaper, around 2.5 million rupiah, compared to other countries like Saudi Arabia, where it can reach 13 million rupiah" (TH4). The combination of financial, academic, and accessibility aspects makes Indonesia a popular choice for Thai students wishing to pursue Arabic studies.

Another motivation is the cultural similarity between Indonesia and Thailand, which is one of the main reasons Thai students feel comfortable during their studies in Indonesia. As explained by TH2, "Islamic values in Indonesia are similar to what we learn in Thailand, so we don't feel like strangers." This opinion is reinforced by TH4, who stated, "There are many similarities in traditions, such as dressing styles and eating habits, which make it easier for us to adapt." Additionally, the social environment also plays a supportive role. TH5 shared, "The social environment here is friendly and supportive, making us feel warmly welcomed." Besides culture and society, language is an important element in creating a sense of familiarity. TH1 added, "The similarity in the use of Arabic in religious learning makes us feel like we're in our own place." This shows that cultural, traditional, and social environmental similarities play a significant role in the adaptation process of Thai students. TH2 acknowledged the ability to build social relationships more easily due to familiar elements from their home culture.

The humanistic approach to Arabic language education in Indonesia attracts Thai students due to its relevance and supportive environment. Teaching methods prioritize discussion, hands-on practice, and real-life application, making learning more engaging. TH3 explained, "Senior students shared that the methods here suit our needs." Additionally, TH5 highlighted the peaceful Islamic values taught alongside Arabic, coupled with Indonesia's stable security compared to Middle Eastern countries. TH1 appreciated how Arabic lessons are connected to daily life, enhancing comprehension. The traditional Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) also intrigued students like TH3, who found their cultural uniqueness fascinating and academically enriching.

Another key factor drawing Thai students to Indonesia is the presence of a supportive Thai student community. TH4 noted, "Having friends from Thailand makes us feel more comfortable." This community shares experiences and provides academic and emotional support, as emphasized by TH2 and TH3. Facing challenges in a new environment becomes easier with mutual assistance. Furthermore, Indonesia's inclusive atmosphere enhances their experience. TH4 added, "We don't feel excluded; instead, we're encouraged to participate actively." The cultural diversity in Indonesia also teaches valuable lessons in

appreciating differences, as expressed by TH5. The combination of effective teaching methods, a strong community, and an inclusive environment fosters holistic learning and supports Thai students in achieving their academic goals effectively.

In terms of language competencies such as phonology, morphology, and syntax in Arabic, Thai students often relate their learning to the shared Malay ethnicity they have with Indonesians. TH4 stated, "We find it easier to understand Arabic in Indonesia because the pronunciation is closer to the sound structures we are familiar with." This is supported by TH3's opinion, who emphasized that the morphology of the Indonesian language helps them better understand Arabic word structures. TH5 explained, "In our language, word structures often resemble those in Indonesian, so studying here feels more natural." Furthermore, students feel that the syntax used in teaching Arabic in Indonesia tends to be simpler and aligns with sentence patterns they are familiar with. TH3 added, "The sentence structure taught here feels more familiar, not as complicated as what we encounter in Arab countries." Cultural similarities also play a supporting role, as expressed by TH2: "We feel more accepted in Indonesia, and this makes the learning process more enjoyable."

International students from Thailand studying Arabic in Indonesia face significant challenges, particularly in language proficiency. Key issues arise from the phonological differences between Thai, Arabic, and Indonesian. Arabic's complex phonemes, such as 'ain and ghain, lack equivalents in Thai, causing pronunciation difficulties and hindering comprehension of Arabic texts. Additionally, Arabic's rich vocabulary, with many context-dependent meanings, demands extra effort to master. Grammatically, Thai students struggle with Arabic's intricate syntactic patterns and i'rab system, contrasting with Thai's simpler structure. Environmental barriers further complicate learning, as daily Arabic interaction remains limited despite Indonesia's Islamic institutions using the language. Limited prior experience in active Arabic communication exacerbates these challenges, as most Thai learning focuses on memorization rather than practical use. Consequently, students often feel less confident speaking, slowing their language skill development.

What Challenges Do They Face?

This study found that international students from Thailand studying Arabic in Indonesia face significant challenges related to language proficiency. One of the main issues they encounter is the phonological differences between the Thai, Arabic, and Indonesian languages. As TH1 explained, "The Thai language does not have sounds like the Arabic letters 'ain and ghain, so I find it difficult to pronounce them correctly." This issue is compounded by the richness of Arabic vocabulary, which contains many words with contextual meanings. TH2 revealed, "Arabic vocabulary is very extensive, and many words change meaning depending on the context, which means I have to study more to understand them." These difficulties also affect their comprehension of Arabic texts. TH3 added, "I

often feel confused when reading Arabic texts because some words are not easily understood."

In addition to phonological and vocabulary challenges, Thai students also struggle with understanding Arabic grammar, which is much more complex compared to the Thai language. TH4 explained, "Thai is simpler in grammatical structure compared to Arabic, which has a complicated i‘rab system." Mastering Arabic syntax takes longer, especially for those accustomed to simpler sentence patterns. TH5 stated, "The difference in sentence structure between Thai and Arabic often causes me to make mistakes when constructing sentences correctly." Moreover, environmental language barriers also play a significant role. Although they are in Indonesia, Arabic is not widely used in daily life, making it difficult for students to practice speaking actively.

Environmental factors also influence the development of Thai students' Arabic language skills. They often find it challenging to speak Arabic actively because most of their learning in Thailand focuses more on memorization and theory rather than direct communication. TH1 stated, "In Thailand, we mostly learn Arabic theoretically, so when it comes time to speak, we feel less confident." TH2 added, "The lack of direct speaking experience in Arabic makes me feel awkward when trying to communicate." Most Thai students, as expressed by TH3, "Tend to be afraid of making mistakes when speaking, so we prefer to stay silent rather than attempt to talk." These factors, combined with limited opportunities to practice Arabic in daily life, slow down the overall development of their language abilities.

Motivation of International Cambodian Students

This study found that Cambodian international students choose Indonesia for Arabic language studies due to affordable living costs, socio-cultural similarities, and integrated Islamic education. While initially less informed about Indonesia's Arabic programs, they found the cost of living more economical than in Arab countries (Reference: Study Context). Cultural similarities between Cambodia and Indonesia ease adaptation, despite weaker alumni support compared to Arab nations. The integration of Arabic with Islamic studies in Indonesia attracts students seeking both linguistic and religious knowledge. Social connections, such as prospects of partners or relatives from Indonesia with strong Arabic skills, also influence their decision. Professionally, Arabic is gaining importance in Cambodia's Islamic diplomacy and media sectors, aligning more closely with Indonesia's context than that of Arab countries. Despite Arabic being native to Arab nations, Indonesia offers a culturally familiar environment for skill development. This combination of affordability, cultural proximity, and professional relevance makes Indonesia an attractive destination for Cambodian students seeking to develop Arabic proficiency.

They choose to study Arabic in Indonesia for several reasons related to the quality of education, cost of living, and socio-cultural proximity. CM1 stated, "I didn't know much about the quality of Arabic language education in Indonesia before coming, but after studying further, I found that the quality is very good."

This shows that despite initially having limited information, Cambodian students found that Indonesia offers adequate programs in Arabic language education. Moreover, CM2 revealed, “The cost of living in Indonesia is much cheaper compared to Arab countries, so this is a more practical choice for me.” This highlights the economic factors influencing their decision to study in Indonesia. Furthermore, CM3 added, “I feel very comfortable living in Indonesia because the cost of living is more affordable compared to Arab countries.” This indicates that ease in managing living costs is an important factor that cannot be overlooked. CM4 also emphasized, “Even though I didn’t fully know much about Indonesia, I feel that the lower cost of living makes it more advantageous to study here.” So, aside from educational quality, economic factors play a crucial role in their decision to choose Indonesia.

The social, cultural, and academic connections between Cambodia and Indonesia significantly influence Cambodian students' decisions to study in Indonesia. Culturally, similarities in religion, customs, and social interactions create a sense of familiarity, helping students adapt more easily. As CM3 noted, these shared cultural aspects make them feel comfortable and secure. CM4 echoed this, emphasizing that the similarities ease their adjustment despite being in a foreign country. However, challenges remain, as CM5 pointed out differences in daily habits requiring adaptation. Still, CM1 highlighted that shared lifestyle and religious views foster acceptance, enhancing their comfort.

Academically, Indonesia's integration of Arabic language learning with Islamic studies is a key draw for Cambodian students. CM5 expressed interest in how this approach deepens religious understanding, while CM1 appreciated the opportunity to combine Arabic proficiency with Islamic knowledge. CM2 praised Indonesia's comprehensive education system, which offers holistic learning not found elsewhere. Similarly, CM4 valued the dual focus on language and religion, calling it vital for personal growth.

Additionally, social connections are a crucial consideration for Cambodian students. CM1 expressed, “I hope to build relationships with Indonesians who come from good family backgrounds and are proficient in Arabic, as this will open up more opportunities for me.” This aspect of personal relationships shows that international students often seek social and professional benefits through their education. CM3 also stated, “I hope to have friends or a partner from Indonesia who can help me with Arabic and expand my social network.” This indicates that social and professional connections play a significant role in their decision to study in Indonesia. CM4 added, “Having good relations with Indonesians who speak Arabic can open up great career opportunities for me in the future.” Therefore, they see education in Indonesia not only as a tool to gain knowledge but also as a way to expand their social networks. CM5 stated, “I also hope to get better job opportunities in Cambodia after studying in Indonesia, especially in fields related to Arabic.” This highlights that social connections and career opportunities are equally important supporting factors.

Not only that, but professional factors also play a major role in their decision to study Arabic in Indonesia. CM2 stated, “Arabic is highly needed in the Islamic diplomacy and media sectors in Cambodia, and Indonesia has more similarities in

this regard compared to Arab countries.” This signifies that Cambodian students see better job opportunities in these sectors with strong Arabic language skills, and Indonesia is an ideal place to develop these skills. CM3 revealed, “The diplomatic sector in Cambodia is growing, and Arabic is one of the most needed skills there.” This shows that they see brighter career prospects by mastering Arabic. CM1 added, “In Indonesia, I am not only learning the language but also preparing myself for future job opportunities, particularly in sectors related to Islam.” This demonstrates that they view education in Indonesia not just as an academic process but also as an investment in their future. CM4 also stated, “I want to work in media or diplomacy in Cambodia, and Arabic is a very valuable skill in these fields.”

Their decision to choose Indonesia is not solely driven by academic or economic factors but also by cultural similarities that ease their adaptation. CM5 said, “When I am in Indonesia, I feel at home because our cultures are very similar. This makes it easier for me to interact with locals.” This social and cultural closeness adds value, making it easier for them to adapt to daily life. CM2 added, “Even though I am far from home, I don’t feel alienated because I can find many similarities in everyday life with Indonesians.” This shows that despite being abroad, a sense of social connection can still be maintained. CM3 argued, “There are many similarities in how Indonesians and Cambodians interact, which helps me feel more comfortable in my social life.” This illustrates that cultural similarities make it easier for them to build social relationships with the local community. CM4 also revealed, “I feel like I can easily mingle with Indonesians because of many shared habits, such as in the way we speak and social etiquette.” Therefore, this social and cultural closeness provides them comfort in navigating daily life in Indonesia.

However, despite many cultural similarities, CM4 reminded that challenges still exist. “Although Indonesia shares many cultural similarities with Cambodia, there are still differences that I have to face, such as in language and some daily habits.” This shows that despite many similarities; students still need to adapt to existing differences. CM1 added, “Differences in habits, such as in dressing styles and meal times, do exist, but these are part of an exciting new experience.” This suggests that, although there are challenges in adapting, Cambodian students view them as part of a valuable learning experience. CM2 stated, “I have to learn to adjust to a slightly different way of life, but it gives me new insights into Indonesian culture.” This suggests that despite obstacles in the adaptation process, Cambodian students still enjoy their experience. CM3 also mentioned, “Cultural differences do exist, but I feel more comfortable over time and can adjust well.” This signifies that although there are difficulties at first, they eventually manage to adapt and feel comfortable with the differences.

Another advantage found is the quality of education that is integrated with social and religious life. CM5 explained, “I feel that Arabic language education in Indonesia is more comprehensive because I can learn the language while deepening my understanding of the Islamic religion.” This proves that Cambodian students see Indonesia as a place that offers holistic Arabic language learning, both academically and spiritually. CM1 added, “I can study Arabic while

deepening my religious knowledge, which are two very important things for me.” This shows that Cambodian students seek an education that combines academic and spiritual elements. CM2 stated, “I am very satisfied with the way teaching is done in Indonesia, which not only teaches Arabic but also focuses on religious understanding.” This indicates that they feel education in Indonesia is very holistic and meets their needs. CM4 commented, “Indonesia has given me the opportunity to deepen my religious knowledge while mastering Arabic, which is a combination I really need.” This shows that the integration of language and religious education is a significant added value for them.

Moreover, CM1 added, “Although I initially did not know much about the quality of education in Indonesia, now I am satisfied with what I have learned, and I do not regret choosing to study here.” This illustrates that despite initial uncertainty; Cambodian students feel that their decision to choose Indonesia has proven to provide significant benefits in their academic and personal development. CM2 also commented, “I am truly impressed with the quality of education in Indonesia, especially in terms of the depth of religious knowledge I have gained.” This shows that they feel Indonesia provides an education that meets their expectations, both in terms of academic quality and depth of religious understanding. CM3 added, “Education in Indonesia exceeds my expectations, especially in connecting Arabic with a broader religious context.” This indicates that Cambodian students feel that education in Indonesia is very comprehensive and aligns with their goals. CM4 expressed, “I am satisfied with my choice to study Arabic in Indonesia because I am gaining more than just language skills; I am also gaining a deeper understanding of Islam.”

What challenges do they face?

This study found that Cambodian international students studying Arabic in Indonesia face a range of complex challenges, encompassing linguistic, socio-cultural, and pedagogical aspects. From a language perspective, they struggle with differences in dialects and variations in the use of Indonesian, which is used in teaching Arabic in Indonesia, especially given their background where the Arabic language does not directly influence them. This hinders their understanding of instructions delivered in Indonesian during the teaching and learning process. Additionally, political factors in Cambodia also pose a challenge, with political uncertainty potentially affecting their access to financial support and relevant education policies for continuing their studies abroad. On the socio-cultural side, adapting to Indonesian culture presents its own set of challenges, considering the differences in social interactions and daily habits that affect their comfort in communicating and interacting with fellow students and instructors. From a pedagogical standpoint, the traditional methods commonly used in teaching Arabic are less suited to the learning styles of Cambodian students, who are more accustomed to experiential and contextual learning. This mismatch can hinder their optimal development of Arabic language competence, necessitating adjustments in teaching approaches to be more flexible and adaptive.

One of the main issues is the difference in dialects and variations of Indonesian used in teaching Arabic. As CM1 stated, "I find it difficult to understand instructions in Indonesian because the dialects used in Indonesia are different from the language I am familiar with in Cambodia." This impedes their understanding of the material being taught. Moreover, CM2 added, "I often struggle to comprehend the terminology used in Indonesian in class." This highlights a gap between the language used in teaching and the students' language proficiency. Political uncertainty in Cambodia also affects their access to financial support. "The political situation in Cambodia makes the funding process highly unpredictable, often impacting our ability to continue studying abroad," said CM3. This uncertainty creates tension among students who want to focus on their studies but have to worry about their financial future.

In terms of socio-cultural aspects, Cambodian students face significant challenges in adapting to Indonesian culture, which differs from their habits and way of life. As explained by CM4, "Social norms in Indonesia are very different from those in Cambodia, making it difficult for me to adjust to my classmates." Students feel isolated due to differences in interaction styles and information exchange. On the other hand, CM5 added, "These cultural differences make me uncomfortable speaking with new people." They often feel alienated because it is hard to adapt to a new way of life in Indonesia. Furthermore, differences in social norms also affect how they communicate with teachers and classmates. Not only in personal interactions but also in academic activities, these cultural differences create a gap that is difficult to bridge without adequate support.

From a pedagogical perspective, the Arabic language teaching methods applied in Indonesia often do not align with the learning styles of Cambodian students. CM1 stated, "I prefer experiential learning methods, but here, there is more emphasis on theory." This indicates that traditional and theoretical teaching methods do not meet the needs of students who prioritize practical experience in learning. CM2 also expressed, "Learning that is more focused on practical application would be more effective for us." They feel that a more contextual and applicable approach would better assist them in understanding the Arabic language in a more comprehensive way. In this regard, CM3 added, "If we could relate our learning to everyday situations, it would be easier for us to remember and use the language." However, teaching that is too focused on theory can lead students to feel disengaged from the learning process. Cambodian students require an approach that is more suited to their learning style to optimize their Arabic language competency.

Overall, Cambodian students need a more flexible and adaptive approach in Arabic language teaching to overcome existing challenges. As CM4 conveyed, "We need more interactive and enjoyable methods that allow us to learn through direct experience." Students believe that changes in teaching methods could provide them with better opportunities to develop their Arabic language skills. CM5 also noted, "With a more practical and experience-based approach, we can learn Arabic in a way that is easier and more enjoyable." These adjustments would not only help them adapt to Arabic language instruction in Indonesia but also enhance their ability to use Arabic in daily life. Therefore, developing teaching

methods that are more responsive to the needs of Cambodian students becomes highly important. The mismatch between the applied methods and the students' learning needs can become a significant barrier to achieving their academic goals, making the adjustment of teaching methods a necessary step to address this issue..

DISCUSSION

This study reveals that international students from Thailand and Cambodia share similar motivations for choosing Indonesia as a destination to study the Arabic language, despite differences in their backgrounds and experiences. Both groups of students are attracted to the more affordable education costs in Indonesia compared to other countries, as well as the cultural proximity that eases their adaptation process (Andayani & Gilang, 2020; Azizah et al., 2024). Thai students tend to emphasize the similarities between Islamic values and culture, which support their comfort in learning, as well as the presence of a large Thai student community in Indonesia, which plays an important role in helping them adapt socially and academically (Larasati & Mayagita, 2021; Munip, 2020). On the other hand, Cambodian students focus more on the affordable quality of Arabic language education and the deep integration of Islamic studies. However, they face challenges in obtaining social support from alumni, who are more commonly found in Arab countries (Warnis et al., 2019). The similarity between the two groups lies in Indonesia's more contextual and communicative educational approach, which is considered easier to understand compared to the formal methods applied in Arab countries (Husein et al., 2023). Additionally, professional factors are an essential consideration for Cambodian students, as the Arabic language is increasingly in demand in the fields of diplomacy and media (Nurrohman et al., 2022). Although there are similarities in motivating factors, the choice to study in Indonesia for Cambodian students is more driven by social connections and career opportunities. In contrast, Thai students are more attracted to cultural aspects and the direct sense of community support they experience (Syafei et al., 2024).

Thai and Cambodian students encounter distinct challenges in learning Arabic. Thai students struggle with Arabic phonology, particularly pronouncing letters like 'ain and ghain,' which are absent in their native language, as well as mastering vocabulary rich in contextual meaning (Yaseen, 2024). Research highlights that understanding vocabulary is vital, with collocations aiding mastery (Garba et al., 2023). Cambodian students face dialectal differences, confusion stemming from the use of Indonesian in teaching, and socio-cultural barriers, including adapting to Indonesian culture and political factors that limit financial and educational support (Dinh et al., 2015).

Socio-cultural challenges have a significant impact on learning, underscoring the importance of cultural awareness in teaching (Marzuki et al., 2023). Additionally, Cambodian students find traditional Arabic teaching methods unsuitable, preferring experiential learning approaches (Febriani et al., 2023). While Thai students focus on phonological and vocabulary difficulties,

Cambodian students grapple with socio-cultural, political, and pedagogical issues, making their learning process more complex.

Table 2: Motivations of international students from Thailand and Cambodia in choosing Indonesia as a place to study the Arabic language

Aspects	Thai students	Cambodian Students	Equation
Financial Motivation	Tuition fees are more affordable than other countries	Tuition fees are more affordable than other countries	The cost of education in Indonesia is considered more economical.
Cultural Proximity	The similarity of Islamic values and culture provides comfort in learning	Cultural proximity makes adaptation easy	The friendly Indonesian culture makes it easy for students to adapt.
Social Support	The existence of a large Thai student community in Indonesia makes it easier to adapt socially and academically	Social support is limited, but still appreciates the educational atmosphere in Indonesia	There is ease of adaptation even though the scale of social support is different.
Quality of Education	Captivated by a contextual and communicative approach to education	Focus on quality Arabic language education and in-depth Islamic studies	Contextual and communicative learning methods are easier to understand than formal methods.
Professional Factors	Not mentioned as a major factor	Arabic is increasingly in demand in the diplomacy and media sectors	The relevance of Arabic for future career opportunities.
Cultural Factors	More interested in the similarity of Islamic and cultural values	Cultural factors are not too dominant, focusing more on educational and	Indonesian culture is considered conducive to learning.

		professional aspects	
Social Connection	Community factors are the main drivers	Indonesia's choice is influenced by the opportunity to make professional connections	Social factors provide added value in the academic experience in Indonesia.

In the context of Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, basic needs such as physiological and safety must be met before individuals can achieve higher needs, such as social, esteem, and self-actualization (Bakar & Osman, 2022). Thai and Cambodian students studying in Indonesia meet their physiological and safety needs through affordable education costs and a stable learning environment. Social needs become an important factor, especially for Thai students who receive support from a large community of Thai students in Indonesia, helping them adapt (Crandall et al., 2019). Conversely, Cambodian students face challenges in the social aspect, such as a lack of a strong alumni network, indicating that these needs are not fully met. At the esteem level, both groups of students appreciate the contextual and communicative quality of Arabic language education in Indonesia, but Cambodian students are also influenced by career aspirations in diplomacy and media, showing a drive toward self-actualization (Husein et al., 2023). However, linguistic and pedagogical challenges, such as dialect differences and traditional teaching methods, become obstacles in meeting the cognitive needs required to reach their full potential (Nafi'ah & Setiyawan, 2024). On the other hand, Thai students facing phonological difficulties seem to be more supported by cultural and community backing, allowing them to focus more on esteem and self-actualization needs. Overall, Maslow's theory provides a useful framework for understanding how need factors influence the learning experiences and motivations of these two groups of students (Hale et al., 2018).

Building upon the foundational insights provided by Maslow's hierarchy, a deeper theoretical engagement with contemporary frameworks such as the push-pull model (Portes, 1997), Bourdieu's concept of habitus (Bourdieu, 1990), and the cross-cultural adaptation framework (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001) offers a more nuanced understanding of the transnational student experience. While Maslow's theory suggests a linear progression toward self-actualization, the reality for Thai and Cambodian students in Indonesia appears more fluid and context-dependent, shaped by structural forces and cultural capital that the push-pull model captures effectively students are simultaneously drawn by Indonesia's linguistic prestige and affordable education system while being pushed by domestic limitations in language instruction or career opportunities (Dustmann & Weiss, 2007). Bourdieu's habitus further illuminates how students' prior educational experiences and social backgrounds condition their dispositions toward risk-taking, language learning resilience, and identity negotiation in a new

sociocultural setting (Reed-Danahay, 2017). For instance, the stronger sense of belonging among Thai students may reflect greater cultural capital and habitus compatibility within Indonesian academic spaces, whereas Cambodian students' struggle to form cohesive networks signals a misalignment between their habitus and field, affecting their ability to satisfy social and esteem needs (King, 2013). Furthermore, the cross-cultural adaptation framework reveals that language proficiency and intercultural competence—often overlooked in Maslow's cognitive layer are not merely prerequisites for self-actualization but are deeply intertwined with identity construction and psychological well-being (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). The empirical findings thus suggest that while Maslow's hierarchy can map broad motivational trajectories, it often fails to account for the recursive and interdependent nature of language learning, identity negotiation, and transnational belonging, particularly when students oscillate between multiple layers of need fulfillment due to shifting contextual demands (Ozga & Jones, 2006).

This study enriches the understanding of international students' motivations and challenges in learning Arabic in Indonesia by critically and comparatively integrating its findings with previous research. It supports Al-Harbi's (2020) assertion that Southeast Asian students choose Indonesia for its contextual educational approach and affordability, while also emphasizing differences based on countries of origin—an aspect not explored in Al-Harbi's study. In contrast to Annisa and Safii (2023), who found that students in higher education faced pedagogical difficulties due to traditional teaching methods, this study reveals that Thai and Cambodian students appreciate the communicative approaches used in Indonesian institutions. Furthermore, unlike Huda and Afrita (2023), who reported that students from non-Muslim countries prefer Arab countries for their linguistic and cultural authenticity, this research highlights the preference of Thai and Cambodian students for Indonesia's localized approach. The study also offers new insights by identifying cultural and political adaptation barriers faced by Cambodian students, as well as specific linguistic challenges experienced by Thai students issues rarely discussed in prior literature, as noted by Zainuri (2019). Overall, these findings demonstrate how local-context-based pedagogy in Indonesia provides a meaningful alternative for Arabic language learning and underscore the importance of considering students' national backgrounds in understanding variations in motivational and challenging factors, as emphasized by Muslimah (2021).

The findings of this study have significant implications for international student mobility, language education policy, and intercultural communication. From the perspective of international student mobility, Indonesia's appeal as a destination for studying the Arabic language reflects global trends where cost, cultural relevance, and social support are key considerations for prospective learners. This highlights the need for host countries to develop inclusive academic environments that support cross-cultural adaptation. In terms of language education policy, Indonesia's more contextual and communicative approach to teaching Arabic could serve as a model to enhance the effectiveness of foreign language instruction globally (Singh & Jack, 2022). Additionally, the integration

of Islamic values and professionalism into the curriculum strengthens its relevance to modern labor market demands. On the side of intercultural communication, the study underscores the critical role of social networks and community support in helping international students overcome cultural and linguistic barriers (Park et al., 2022). Therefore, policies that facilitate intercultural interaction and cross-border mentorship programs can be strategic steps to strengthen international relations and enrich students' learning experiences. Overall, these findings offer valuable insights into how education can act as a cultural bridge and a tool for building soft diplomacy between nations.

CONCLUSION

This research highlights the dynamics of motivation, experiences, and unique challenges faced by international students from Thailand and Cambodia while learning Arabic in Indonesia. The study reveals that Thai students are primarily motivated by shared Islamic values and strong community support. In contrast, Cambodian students are more attracted to the integrated quality of education offered, along with global career opportunities post-graduation. However, both groups encounter significant challenges: Thai students struggle with phonological difficulties in mastering Arabic pronunciation, while Cambodian students face cultural adaptation issues and financial constraints during their studies. Based on these findings, educational institutions in Indonesia are encouraged to adopt more specific policies. For Thai students, institutions could develop intensive phonetic training programs to address technical pronunciation difficulties in Arabic. Meanwhile, for Cambodian students, it is recommended that scholarship programs or financial aid initiatives be established, along with cultural integration support such as cross-cultural workshops or local mentoring systems. Additionally, institutions should enhance their academic and psychosocial support services to help international students adapt effectively. By implementing these recommendations, educational institutions can create a more inclusive learning environment that fosters the success of international students.

A limitation of this research is its restricted geographic scope and sample size, which may not fully represent the diversity of experiences among students from both countries. Additionally, the study does not deeply explore psychological aspects that influence students' adaptability and academic success. Future researchers should expand the scope of the study by involving more universities and student groups from other countries to identify broader patterns. They should also develop more inclusive experience-based pedagogical approaches that consider the linguistic and cultural needs of each group. By doing so, these findings can help educational institutions design more effective programs to support the academic success of international students in Indonesia, while strengthening Indonesia's position as a global destination for Arabic language studies.

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