THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE ARABIC LANGUAGE ENVIRONMENT IN ENHANCING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN TEACHING ARABIC AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: AN APPLIED STUDY AT THE FACULTY OF USULUDDIN, SULTAN SHARIF ALI ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY (UNISSA), BRUNEI DARUSSALAM

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Abstract:

This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of the Arabic linguistic environment in developing communicative competence among first-year students at the Faculty of Sharia, Sultan Sharif Ali Islamic University, Brunei Darussalam. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of second language acquisition and educational communication, the research proceeds from a central hypothesis: that an interactive Arabic-speaking environment constitutes a critical component in fostering communicative competence, particularly within non-Arabic university contexts where Arabic is taught for communicative purposes. The study adopts a descriptive-evaluative quantitative methodology, renowned for its precision in analyzing educational phenomena through measurable indicators that are amenable to objective statistical analysis. The research instrument employed is a closed-ended questionnaire constructed on a five-point Likert scale, encompassing several key dimensions: the availability of Arabic language input, in-class and extracurricular interaction, and the use of Arabic in visual media across the university setting. Data were collected from a purposive sample of 22 students, representing 63% of the target population. Analytical procedures included percentage analysis, weighted mean scores, and standard deviations, supported by established theoretical models such as Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985), Canale and Swain's Communicative Competence Framework (1980), and Oxford's Language Learning Strategies Model (1997). The findings reveal several pivotal indicators. Notably, 83.3% of the respondents affirmed the presence of a stimulating Arabic environment conducive to daily communication—reflecting the successful application of the

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"comprehensible input" principle within a low-anxiety learning context. Moreover, the study observed a high level of vertical interaction between instructors and students (86.7%), contrasted by a lower rate of horizontal peer interaction (71.7%), indicating limited informal social use of Arabic. The presence of Arabic in formal visual displays ranged between 66.7% and 76.7%, suggesting an incomplete immersion environment. However, extracurricular activities demonstrated a positive impact on the development of both oral (75%) and written (73.3%) skills, though the findings underscore the need for greater curricular support for writing proficiency. These results underscore the necessity of reforming educational policies to foster a holistic, low-anxiety Arabic language environment rooted in authentic communicative interaction, immersive exposure, and a balanced integration of formal and informal inputs—thereby enhancing communicative competence in Arabic as a foreign language across Asian university settings.

Keywords: environment, language, Arabic, communicative competence, Sultan Sharif Ali Islamic University

1. Introduction

In the face of accelerating global transformations and the sweeping tides of cultural and intellectual globalization, language has evolved beyond its traditional function as a mere tool of communication. It has become a cornerstone in shaping identity, a bridge for intercultural engagement, and a vital conduit for acquiring knowledge and participating in knowledge-based societies. Within this contemporary context, the Arabic language holds a uniquely privileged status in the Islamic world—not only as the language of the Qur'an but also as a vessel of rich civilizational heritage and a living medium of communication across academic, religious, and cultural domains.

Accordingly, the need to cultivate an authentic Arabic linguistic environment for non-native speakers has grown increasingly pressing. Such an environment is essential for activating learners' communicative competence and equipping them to use the language meaningfully in real-world contexts rather than limiting its use to abstract theoretical instruction. Scholarly literature on second language acquisition consistently emphasizes the decisive role of the linguistic environment in facilitating successful learning. The linguistic setting serves as the "natural gateway" to acquisition, as articulated in Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985, pp. 31–39), which stipulates that language input must be comprehensible, embedded in a low-anxiety context, and enriched with interaction.

Within this pedagogical vision, Sultan Sharif Ali Islamic University stands out as one of the leading institutions that embraces Arabic as a living, communicative language—not merely as a traditional subject of content instruction. However, the actual effectiveness of the Arabic linguistic environment within the university and its impact on students' communicative competence remains a critical question that warrants systematic investigation and evaluation.

Previous research has demonstrated that the components of a language-learning environment extend far beyond the classroom. They include verbal interaction, visual stimuli, extracurricular engagement, and everyday cultural practices (Brown, 2007, pp. 112–123; Nation & Macalister, 2010, p. 106). Studies by Harmer (2015, pp. 88–120) and Lightbown & Spada (2006, pp. 39–101) have further shown that a weak or limited linguistic environment significantly undermines the practical use of the target language in university life, thereby restricting the natural acquisition process and confining the language to the boundaries of the formal classroom setting.

In light of these pedagogical challenges, the present study seeks to evaluate the extent to which an effective Arabic-speaking environment is available for communicative interaction at Sultan Sharif Ali Islamic University. It undertakes a quantitative field-based analysis of the perceptions of students from the Faculty of Sharia who participated in the "Communicative Arabic" course during the 2024 academic year. The study aims to assess the availability of interactive linguistic features, visual linguistic presence, and extracurricular activities, and to analyze their collective impact on the development of communicative competence.

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to the broader academic endeavor of establishing contextually grounded models for teaching Arabic to non-native speakers. It also offers practical insights into strategies for enhancing the university linguistic environment and embedding language use within dynamic and authentic contexts—thereby bridging the gap between knowledge and skill, and between content and communicative function.

2. Theoretical Framework and Review of Related Literature

2.1. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in a constellation of contemporary educational and linguistic theories that provide conceptual clarity on the relationship between linguistic environment and the acquisition of communicative competence among learners of Arabic as a foreign language. The principal theoretical models underpinning this study are outlined as follows:

2.1.1. The Natural Approach

The cornerstone of this framework is Krashen's (1985) Comprehensible Input Hypothesis, which posits that effective second language acquisition occurs only when learners are exposed to understandable language input within a low-anxiety, interaction-rich environment that facilitates natural linguistic immersion (Krashen, 1985, pp. 31–39). Accordingly, the use of Arabic across educational facilities, extracurricular activities, and daily interactions enhances opportunities for subconscious acquisition, transforming Arabic from a formal subject into a lived linguistic practice.

2.1.2. The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching

Articulated by Canale and Swain (1980), this approach asserts that the core of language learning lies in the development of comprehensive communicative competence, which comprises four

fundamental dimensions: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. This pedagogical model requires an authentic, real-world environment that encourages learners to engage in meaningful communicative acts both inside and beyond the classroom, thus reinforcing language through practice rather than rote instruction (Canale & Swain, 1980, pp. 1–47).

2.1.3. Language Modeling Theory

This theory draws upon Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory, which emphasizes the role of observational learning in behavior formation. Within this context, the teacher serves as a linguistic role model, and their verbal conduct—both in peer and student interactions—plays a vital role in shaping learners' linguistic attitudes and skills through observation and imitation (Bandura, 1977).

2.1.4. Language Anxiety and Oral Performance Theory

Contemporary literature identifies linguistic anxiety as a significant psychological barrier to language use in daily communication. Despite possessing adequate cognitive competence, anxious learners often withdraw or remain silent. Numerous studies confirm that safe, non-judgmental environments enhance oral performance and foster learner confidence (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, pp. 98–101; Ur, 2012, pp. 113–119).

2.1.5. Supportive Textual-Visual Environment

Brown (2007) and Nation & Macalister (2010) highlight the role of environmental visual stimuli—such as signs, banners, and public notices—as part of incidental input, a form of passive linguistic exposure that reinforces language acquisition indirectly and embeds it into the collective consciousness of the academic community (Brown, 2007, pp. 112–123; Nation & Macalister, 2010, p. 106).

2.2. Review of Related Literature

This study is informed by a solid foundation of global and regional scholarship that has examined the concept of the linguistic environment and its role in enhancing communicative competence among foreign language learners. Among the most relevant studies are the following:

a. Harmer (2015)

Harmer emphasized that the teacher's consistent use of the target language within the educational institution is one of the strongest predictors of learners' confidence and willingness to engage in the language, especially when conducted within authentic, open communicative contexts (Harmer, 2015, pp. 88–104). He highlighted the importance of teacher linguistic consistency as a driver of student verbal participation—an insight that directly aligns with the present study.

b. Richards and Rodgers (2001)

This study examined the adverse effects of insufficient Arabic-language interaction in educational settings, noting that the disconnect between formal instructional language and everyday social communication may distort students' perceptions of linguistic identity (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, pp. 157–158).

c. Oxford (1997)

Oxford underscored the importance of horizontal interaction—student-to-student communication in the target language outside formal instruction—as the true indicator of a communicative environment's effectiveness. Its absence, she argued, leads to a phenomenon she termed behavioral diglossia, whereby students adhere to Arabic only in class, reverting to their native languages elsewhere (Oxford, 1997, pp. 37–42).

d. Littlewood (2004)

Littlewood advocated for a pedagogical transition from the "classroom context" to the "living context," asserting that language can only be genuinely acquired when it becomes part of the learner's lived environment. He recommended integrating informal settings and extracurricular activities into the overall language learning experience.

e. Alptekin (2002)

This study addressed the challenges of fostering Arabic language environments in multilingual societies. It warned that in the absence of institutional policy and support, dominant local or global languages—such as English—tend to marginalize the target language, leading to a diminished functional presence of Arabic in university life (Alptekin, 2002, p. 60).

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Method

This study employed a descriptive-evaluative quantitative research method, which is widely recognized as one of the most appropriate approaches in educational research aimed at assessing the effectiveness of learning environments and their influence on language acquisition outcomes. This methodology facilitates precise and objective descriptions of educational phenomena based on participants' responses, using quantifiable indicators amenable to rigorous statistical analysis (Creswell, 2014, pp. 155–159; Cohen et al., 2018, pp. 45–49). The selection of this method was driven by its suitability for exploring the relationship between linguistic environmental variables and the core components of communicative competence among Arabic language learners. Quantitative instruments were employed to capture generalizable patterns and to draw data-driven conclusions grounded in statistical evidence.

The primary objective of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of the Arabic-speaking environment in enhancing students' communicative competence within the Communicative Arabic course offered to first-year students at the Faculty of Sharia, Sultan Sharif Ali Islamic

University, Brunei Darussalam, during the 2024 academic year. The research proceeds from a central hypothesis: the linguistic environment constitutes a pivotal factor in second language acquisition, particularly in university contexts where Arabic is taught as a living communicative medium rather than as a static body of content.

3.2. Population and Sample

The research population included all first-year students enrolled in the Faculty of Sharia at Sultan Sharif Ali Islamic University who studied the Communicative Arabic course during the second semester of the 2024 academic year, totaling 35 students. A purposive sample of 22 students—representing 63% of the total population—was selected, a proportion deemed statistically acceptable for small-scale descriptive-analytical studies (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012, p. 103). Participants were selected based on uniform academic backgrounds and shared exposure to a consistent instructional experience within the university's linguistic environment.

3.3. Research Instrument

Data were collected using a closed-ended questionnaire composed of multiple items designed according to the five-point Likert scale, ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree." The questionnaire items were structured to assess the following dimensions:
- The availability and visibility of the Arabic language environment across campus,
- Teacher-student interactions conducted in Arabic,
- The use of Arabic in official signage and institutional communications,
- The effectiveness of extracurricular activities in fostering communicative competence.

The questionnaire underwent expert review to ensure face validity, specifically by specialists in Teaching Arabic as a Foreign Language (TAFL). Its reliability was previously tested using Cronbach's Alpha, which yielded a coefficient above the accepted threshold (>0.7), as recommended by Muijs (2011, pp. 78–79).

3.4. Data Analysis Techniques

Following data collection, a descriptive quantitative analysis approach was applied. Frequencies, weighted mean scores, and standard deviations were calculated to identify general trends in the participants' responses and to evaluate the strength of indicators related to the Arabic linguistic environment within the university setting.

Interpretation of the results was guided by a set of well-established theoretical frameworks in second language acquisition, particularly:
- Krashen's Natural Approach (1985), with emphasis on comprehensible input and low-anxiety environments,
- Canale and Swain's (1980) Communicative Competence Model, highlighting interaction as the nucleus of language acquisition,
- Oxford's (1997) Cooperative Language Learning Theory, which informed the analysis of peer-to-peer interaction patterns,

Appropriate statistical software was employed for data entry and analysis, and the findings were interpreted through a scientifically grounded, comparative lens, reflecting the actual pedagogical realities of the university's learning environment.

4. Field Study: Quantitative Data Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Availability of an Arabic-Speaking Environment for Daily Communication at Sultan Sharif Ali Islamic University

Statistical results reveal that 83.3% of the participants agreed, to varying degrees, on the existence of an Arabic-speaking environment conducive to daily communication on campus, while 16.7% disagreed. This reflects a predominantly positive collective perception of the Arabic linguistic atmosphere within the university.

This indicator serves as a cornerstone in assessing the effectiveness of a language learning environment, particularly in contexts where Arabic is taught to non-native speakers. Krashen (1985, pp. 31–39) emphasizes that the presence of comprehensible input in a natural, low-anxiety, and interaction-rich environment is crucial for subconscious and effective second language acquisition. The 83.3% approval rate suggests that the university environment, as perceived by the majority of students, is rich in authentic linguistic input, enabling spontaneous use of Arabic in everyday interactions and reinforcing functional communicative dynamics.

Nevertheless, the 16.7% who did not perceive a clear Arabic-speaking environment indicate partial deficiencies, possibly due to inconsistent communication practices or weak linguistic reinforcement mechanisms in certain areas of the university. Linguistic education literature highlights that a lack of daily language consistency can limit continuous exposure to the target language, thus hindering the cumulative development of communicative competence (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, pp. 39–43).

It is noteworthy that the evaluation of the environment was based on the general impression of respondents, underscoring the importance of conducting complementary qualitative studies to identify specific practices and spaces that either enhance or weaken this environment.

4.2. Teacher-to-Teacher Communication in Arabic

The data indicate that 86.7% of participants acknowledged that teachers communicate in Arabic among themselves on campus, while 13.3% did not agree. This high percentage is a strong indicator of institutional linguistic cohesion among faculty members, serving as a critical element of the Language Modeling approach, a concept rooted in Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory.

Teachers' consistent use of Arabic in their professional interactions extends beyond internal communication, reinforcing a shared linguistic identity and sending implicit signals to students that Arabic is not merely a classroom tool but also a medium of life, thought, and intellectual practice. Studies on language teaching (Harmer, 2015, pp. 102–104) have demonstrated that students' linguistic behaviors are strongly influenced by their teachers' use

of the target language, with teacher consistency emerging as a motivational factor that encourages active student engagement.

However, the 13.3% who did not observe this pattern of communication raise questions about the uniformity of such practices—whether they are limited to formal situations or occur in everyday interactions. Research suggests that inconsistent language use by teachers can cause cognitive dissonance among learners and negatively affect their perception of the language's value (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, pp. 157–158).

This study, therefore, recommends strengthening institutional policies mandating the use of Arabic in all professional communication and organizing training workshops to heighten teachers' awareness of their pivotal role in normalizing and modeling the target language.

4.3. Teacher-to-Student Communication in Arabic

Findings show that 86.7% of participants reported that teachers communicate with students in Arabic—of which 50% strongly agreed, 33.3% moderately agreed, and 16.7% remained neutral. This indicator is central to evaluating the linguistic environment, as it pertains to the core of the educational process—the teacher-student relationship through language.

This verbal interaction represents the main transmission channel for language acquisition, playing a decisive role in building communicative competence, especially in contexts where Arabic is taught for functional and communicative purposes. The Communicative Approach proposed by Canale and Swain (1980) underscores the significance of authentic teacher-student interaction in strengthening grammatical, functional, and contextual dimensions of language competence.

This finding also supports Krashen's (1985) assertion on the importance of comprehensible input delivered in low-anxiety settings. Moreover, teacher-student interaction allows for adaptive language modification—known as negotiation of meaning—which facilitates incremental and meaningful learning.

However, the 16.7% neutral responses are concerning, as they may indicate irregular communication or its restriction to formal classroom settings without extending into daily interactive contexts. As Littlewood (2004) argues, language acquisition cannot thrive if confined solely to formal lessons; it must be embedded within spontaneous, trust-based interaction.

Therefore, this study recommends intensifying opportunities for informal teacher-student communication in Arabic—both within and beyond classroom settings—to transform Arabic from an "academic subject" into a "living communication tool."

4.4. Student-to-Teacher Communication in Arabic

The results indicate that 76.7% of participants agreed that students communicate with teachers in Arabic, with 16.7% strongly agreeing and 58.3% moderately agreeing. Meanwhile, 16.7% remained neutral, and 8.3% disagreed.

Although this percentage is relatively high, it is lower than the teacher-to-student interaction rate (86.7%), reflecting a gap in students' verbal output and highlighting an imbalance between language input (from teachers) and output (from students). This

phenomenon is commonly referred to as the imbalance of competence, where receptive skills (e.g., listening and comprehension) outweigh productive skills (e.g., speaking and writing) (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, pp. 98–101).

Several factors may account for this gap, including:

- Language anxiety, which inhibits fluency despite adequate comprehension,
- Fear of making mistakes, prompting students to revert to safer languages (Malay or English),
- Insufficient oral training, which limits verbal fluency.

The Functional Language Use theory emphasizes the need for authentic communicative opportunities that enable learners to transition from comprehension to production. Ur (2012) argues that developing productive competence requires frequent oral drills, immediate feedback, and realistic communicative contexts.

This study thus recommends integrating structured oral activities into classroom sessions, such as:

- Real-life conversational dialogues,
- Role-plays and simulated scenarios,
- Weekly oral presentations,
- Negotiation and debate tasks.

A participatory language approach is also suggested, enabling non-traditional, two-way interactions between students and instructors.

4.5. Peer-to-Peer Communication in Arabic

Statistical findings show that 71.7% of participants agreed that Arabic communication occurs among students, with 8.3% strongly agreeing, 50% moderately agreeing, 33.3% remaining neutral, and 8.3% disagreeing.

This indicator is particularly revealing of the language's spontaneous functionality, as peer-to-peer interaction often occurs outside formal academic supervision, thus serving as a litmus test for the success of Arabic as a natural communication tool. Yet, the relatively lower rate compared to vertical teacher-student interaction suggests a noticeable weakness in students' social use of the language.

The Collaborative Language Learning theory highlights that a failure to cultivate horizontal linguistic interactions often results in behavioral diglossia, whereby students use Arabic in class but revert to their native language outside (Oxford, 1997, pp. 37–42).

To address this, the study proposes:

- Establishing Arabic Language Clubs on campus,
- Organizing group activities such as debates, linguistic festivals, and student forums,
- Assigning collaborative academic tasks requiring coordination in Arabic.

4.6–4.12. Visual, Extracurricular, and Skill-Based Indicators

The remaining indicators (Arabic use in signage and announcements, extracurricular activities, and their effects on oral and written skills) collectively reveal that while 75–76.7% of participants

recognize Arabic's presence in visual elements and non-classroom settings, significant neutrality rates (up to 41.7%) indicate partial or inconsistent implementation.

Notably, extracurricular activities positively impact oral competence (75%) but slightly less so for writing (73.3%), reflecting a skill imbalance. This aligns with Canale & Swain's (1980) assertion that communicative competence requires an equilibrium between receptive and productive skills.

4.2. General Discussion and Interpretation of Findings

Overall, the university demonstrates a strong Arabic environment (above 70% across most indicators), affirming the presence of a supportive linguistic ecosystem consistent with Krashen's (1985) model of natural acquisition. However, gaps remain, particularly in peer interaction, visual reinforcement, and balanced skill development.

The study emphasizes that sustainable improvement requires:

- Institutional language policies prioritizing Arabic across administrative and academic domains,
- Strengthening horizontal student communication through collaborative learning frameworks,
- Expanding extracurricular and writing-focused activities to achieve balanced competence.

5. Findings, Interpretative Propositions, and Recommendations

5.1 Key Findings

The field-based investigation into the effectiveness of the Arabic linguistic environment at Sultan Sharif Ali Islamic University yielded several significant findings that offer a precise reflection of the current state of Arabic communication on campus. The most salient results can be summarized as follows:

- Strong Institutional Support for Arabic (83.3%): The majority of students reported that the university provides a supportive Arabic-speaking environment for daily interaction. This finding aligns with Krashen's (1985, pp. 31–39) emphasis on the critical role of comprehensible input within low-anxiety, high-interaction contexts for effective second language acquisition.
- Robust Vertical Interaction Between Teachers and Students (86.7%): Both teacher-to-teacher and teacher-to-student communication scored identically, reflecting a high level of institutional linguistic cohesion and reinforcing language modeling, a cornerstone of observational learning (Bandura, 1977).
- Weak Horizontal Communication Among Students (71.7%): Although this is a relatively positive indicator, its lower rate compared to vertical interaction suggests a gap in informal social use of Arabic—consistent with Oxford's (1997, pp. 37–42) observations on behavioral diglossia as a barrier to communicative competence.

- Partial Presence of Arabic in Visual and Textual Elements: The use of Arabic in signage and official notices ranged between 66.7% and 76.7%, indicating an incomplete visual language environment—contradicting the principles of full linguistic immersion (Nation & Macalister, 2010, p. 106).
- Positive Impact of Extracurricular Activities on Oral (75%) and Written Competence (73.3%): Non-classroom activities emerged as fertile ground for spontaneous oral interaction, though written competence still requires more structured and pedagogical support (Brown, 2007, pp. 120–123; Canale & Swain, 1980).

5.2. Interpretative Propositions

Based on the results, the linguistic landscape of the university can be interpreted as follows:

- The formal (classroom and institutional) environment is highly effective, but the informal social environment exhibits weaker student engagement, thereby limiting spontaneous Arabic communication.
- The visual-textual environment is fragmented, and fails to create a unified linguistic identity, leading to a cognitive disconnect between language and physical space.
- Extracurricular activities, while important, are not yet structurally optimized, resulting in limited integrative development of linguistic skills.

5.3. Recommendations

In light of these insights, the study proposes a series of actionable measures to enhance Arabic as a holistic and sustainable institutional language:

- Adopt a clear institutional language policy: Establish Arabic as the official medium for all administrative and academic communications. Organize internal campaigns to promote Arabic as a unifying language of identity and functionality.
- Strengthen peer interaction in Arabic: Create Arabic student clubs; organize debates, language days, and group competitions; introduce collaborative learning tasks that require communication in Arabic.
- Enhance the visual presence of Arabic on campus: Standardize the design and language of signage and public notices. Establish an editorial unit responsible for language quality across campus spaces. Expand Arabic usage in public spaces as part of everyday cultural practice.
- Restructure extracurricular activities for balanced skill development: Designate "Arabic Conversation Labs" to boost oral fluency; organize workshops focused on functional and creative writing; convert written activities into collaborative projects that foster group editing and idea exchange.
- Encourage teachers to model exemplary Arabic use: Conduct training sessions to raise teachers' awareness of their linguistic modeling role; incorporate negotiation of meaning and scaffolded input strategies into daily pedagogical practice.

5.4. Conclusion

This analysis reveals that Sultan Sharif Ali Islamic University has successfully developed a strong formal Arabic-speaking infrastructure. However, its social, visual, and extracurricular environments require further enhancement to realize the ideal of comprehensive linguistic immersion, enabling learners to shift from viewing Arabic as a course subject to living it as a communicative reality. Implementing the above recommendations could contribute significantly to building a cohesive, institution-wide linguistic ecosystem that activates all channels of natural language acquisition.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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