

# Constructing *Bi'ah Lughawiyyah* in Arabic Language Learning at Bi'tsatul Islamiyah Islamic Boarding School: An Ethnographic Study of Students' Language Practices and Culture

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## Abstract

This study analyses how *bi'ah lughawiyyah* (language environment) is constructed in Arabic language learning at the Bi'tsatul Islamiyah Islamic Boarding School, Mandailing Natal Regency, North Sumatra, treating the language environment as a socio-pedagogical practice shaped by institutional policy and the students' daily life. The study employed a qualitative approach with an ethnographic design. Data were collected through observation and interviews with students and alumni who had directly experienced boarding-school life, and were analysed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña together with Spradley's domain analysis. The findings show that the language environment is built through a scheduled bilingual system: English is used from Monday to Wednesday, Arabic from Thursday to Saturday, and Sunday is a free language day. The policy applies in both classrooms and dormitories, and Indonesian and regional languages are restricted for six days a week. The language section (*qism al-lughah*) supports the system by giving three to five new words (*mufradat*) every day; for first-year students the words are accompanied by example sentences that serve as initial scaffolding. Consistent use is maintained through two layers of language monitors (*jasus*), namely peer monitors and secretly appointed monitors, and through sanctions for violations. The study concludes that the language environment rests not on regulation alone but on the interplay of input, practice opportunities, monitoring, discipline, habituation, and flexibility, forming a deliberately constructed socio-linguistic ecosystem.

**Keywords:** Bi'ah Lughawiyyah, Language Environment, Bilingual Islamic Boarding School, Language Policy, Jasus, Mufradat

## ملخص

يهدف هذا البحث إلى تحليل كيفية تكوين البيئة اللغوية في تعليم اللغة العربية بمعهد بعثة الإسلامية بمحافظة مندابلينغ ناتال، سومطرة الشمالية، باعتبار البيئة اللغوية ممارسة اجتماعية تربوية تتشكل من خلال سياسة المعهد والحياة اليومية للطلاب. استخدم البحث المنهج الكيفي بتصميم إثنوغرافي، وجمعت البيانات عن طريق الملاحظة والمقابلة مع الطلاب والخريجين الذين عاشوا الحياة المعهدية مباشرة، وحُللت وفق النموذج التفاعلي لماليز وهوبرمان وسالدانيا مع تحليل المجالات عند سبرادلي. وأظهرت النتائج أن البيئة اللغوية تُبنى من خلال نظام ثنائي اللغة مُجدول: تُستخدم اللغة الإنجليزية من الاثنين إلى الأربعاء، واللغة العربية من الخميس إلى السبت، ويكون يوم الأحد يومًا حرًا في اختيار اللغة. ويسري هذا النظام في الفصول الدراسية والمسكن معًا، مع تقييد استخدام اللغة الإندونيسية واللغات المحلية ستة أيام في الأسبوع. ويدعم قسم اللغة هذا النظام بإلقاء ثلاث إلى

خمس مفردات جديدة كل يوم، وتُقدّم المفردات لطلاب الصف الأول مصحوبةً بأمثلة في جمل بوصفها سقالةً تعليميةً أولية. ويُحافظ على الالتزام اللغوي من خلال مستويين من الجاسوس: جاسوس من الأقران، وجاسوس يعينه قسم اللغة سرًا، إضافةً إلى العقوبات على المخالفات. ويخلص البحث إلى أن البيئة اللغوية لا تقوم على الأنظمة وحدها، بل على التفاعل بين المدخلات وفرص الممارسة والرقابة والانضباط والتعويد والمرونة، مما يجعلها نظامًا اجتماعيًا لغويًا مُشيدًا عن قصد.

الكلمات المفتاحية: البيئة اللغوية، المعهد ثنائي اللغة، السياسة اللغوية، الجاسوس، المفردات

## Introduction

Learning Arabic in Indonesian Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) differs from foreign language learning that takes place mainly in the classroom. In a *pesantren*, Arabic is not merely a school subject; it can become part of religious life, academic activity, social interaction, and the traditions of the community. The success of language learning in this setting therefore depends heavily on the environment in which students receive input, interact, produce speech, receive feedback, and repeat language use in meaningful contexts. From the perspective of second language acquisition, input, interaction, and output are interrelated elements in the development of communicative competence (Gass, 2017), and an ecological view of language learning places the learner's surroundings, rather than the classroom alone, at the centre of analysis (van Lier, 2004).

The concept of *bi'ah lughawiyyah* (language environment) is therefore better understood not simply as a "place of language" but as a socio-pedagogical environment in which language is learned and used at the same time. Muttaqin, Bakheit, and Hasanah (2024) show that the Arabic language environment in *pesantren* covers both formal and informal domains: the formal domain relates to classroom learning, while the informal domain is realised through vocabulary delivery, conversation practice (*muhadatsah*), public speaking practice (*muhadharah*), and daily interaction. Hamid, Bahrudin, and Mustofa (2008) likewise argue that formal and informal environments work in a complementary way, the former supplying structured knowledge and the latter supplying opportunities for natural use.

Studies of *bi'ah lughawiyyah* have gradually moved from describing programmes towards more contextual analyses. Rahmi et al. (2024), in a phenomenological study of a modern *pesantren*, found that students' speaking skills developed through the combination of formal and

informal environments and the presence of language role models. Ruswatie, Asrori, and Sholeh (2021) reported that three *pesantren* in Central Java combined language rooms, language organisations, designated Arabic days, and regular evaluation to support language acquisition. Studies of bilingual policy also show that Arabic and English in modern *pesantren* function not only as subjects but as languages of communication regulated by institutional rules, often supported by rewards and educational punishment (Febriyanti et al., 2021). This perspective raises a more fundamental question: how is a language environment constructed and maintained by the *pesantren* community?

Previous studies generally highlight programme implementation, management of the language environment, habituation, or contribution to speaking skills. Almuzakir et al. (2023) describe the language section (*qism al-lughah*) of a modern *pesantren* as the unit that delivers daily vocabulary, organises conversation practice, appoints language monitors, and runs the language court. Rizqi (2019) examines the role of language monitors (*jasus*) in creating *bi'ah lughawiyyah*, and Rahmawati, Abunawas, and Yusuf (2022) show how the language environment supports Arabic learning at Darul Huffadh Islamic Boarding School in Bone. These studies are important, but they tend to treat each instrument separately and leave room to examine how the instruments operate together as a system.

The Bi'tsatul Islamiyah Islamic Boarding School in Mandailing Natal Regency, North Sumatra, provides a relevant context for this question. The school requires its students to use Arabic and English in daily life. What matters, however, is not only the presence of the two languages but the mechanisms that make them recur in everyday life: language rules, the allocation of days, vocabulary activities, use of the target languages in the dormitory, language monitors, sanctions, and a free language day. This study therefore does not aim to measure students' language proficiency; it seeks to understand the construction of the language environment as a social and pedagogical practice.

The study addresses the following questions: (1) How is *bi'ah lughawiyyah* constructed in the life of the Bi'tsatul Islamiyah boarding school? (2) How do time and space policies regulate language use? (3) How does the provision of *mufradat* support students in fulfilling their language obligations? (4) How do *jasus* and sanctions maintain language discipline? (5) How do these

mechanisms together shape a bilingual communication culture? The contribution of the study lies in interpreting *bi'ah lughawiyyah* as a process of institutionalising language practices, that is, as an ecosystem made up of rules, actors, space, time, linguistic resources, control mechanisms, and room for flexibility.

## Method

This study used a qualitative approach with an ethnographic design. The design was chosen because the aim was not merely to identify language programmes but to understand language practices as part of the social life of the *pesantren*. An ethnographic approach allows the researcher to understand the relationship between rules, customs, interactions, role assignments, and the meanings that members of a *pesantren* community attach to language practices (Indrasanti & Wita, 2023). Spradley's (1980) framework of domains, categories, and relationships between categories was used to read the culture under study.

The research was conducted at the Bi'tsatul Islamiyah Islamic Boarding School in Mandailing Natal Regency, North Sumatra. Primary data came from students and alumni who had direct experience of boarding-school life. Informants were selected purposively on the basis of their first-hand knowledge of the language rules and the daily routine, and their accounts were used to reconstruct the language system in force, particularly the patterns of Arabic and English use, language obligations, the division of days, vocabulary activities, monitoring, sanctions, and the free language day. Secondary data in the form of institutional information and supporting documents were used to complement the interpretation.

Data were collected through observation and interviews. Observation focused on language use in formal and informal settings, while interviews explored informants' experiences and knowledge of the language rules and practices. The data were analysed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Following Spradley's domain analysis, the data were then grouped into seven themes: regulation, time, linguistic input, practice space, monitoring, discipline, and flexibility. The accounts of current students and alumni were compared with each other and with observation data to check the consistency of the reconstruction.

## Results and Discussion

### Results

#### 1. Language Regulation and the Weekly Language Cycle

Interview data revealed a systematic distribution of language use. English is used from Monday to Wednesday, Arabic from Thursday to Saturday, and Sunday is a free language day. During the six regulated days, students are required to use the designated language and are not permitted to use Indonesian or regional languages in interactions within the boarding school. The bilingual environment at Bi'tsatul Islamiyah is thus organised through the management of time, as summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1. Weekly Distribution of Language Use at Bi'tsatul Islamiyah**

| Day               | Language    | Function in the system     |
|-------------------|-------------|----------------------------|
| Monday–Wednesday  | English     | Intensive English practice |
| Thursday–Saturday | Arabic      | Intensive Arabic practice  |
| Sunday            | Free choice | Communication flexibility  |

*Source: Interview data*

This arrangement can be described as a scheduled bilingual environment, in which the distribution of the two target languages is determined by an institutional timetable. It resembles the language-day practice found in other *pesantren*, where designated days are used to accustom students to Arabic and English (Ruswatie et al., 2021). At Bi'tsatul Islamiyah, the three-day rotation gives each target language a regular block of practice time every week. Policy, in this sense, determines which language is expected in which time domain, in line with Spolsky's (2004) view that language policy is realised not only in official statements but also in the management of actual language practices.

#### 2. Extending the Target Languages from Classroom to Dormitory

The obligation to use the target language is not limited to classroom learning but extends to the dormitory. According to informants, the rule applies wherever students interact during the six regulated days. This extension changes the function of the language. In the classroom, language is learned through structured materials and exercises; in the dormitory, it is used for more spontaneous needs, such as talking with friends, asking for something, discussing daily matters, or

carrying out routine activities. The dormitory therefore becomes a practice space in which students connect linguistic knowledge with real communication needs.

In class, students receive explanations, exercises, and language models. In the dormitory, they are challenged to use the language in more authentic situations. When language learned in class is used to interact with peers, the link between declarative knowledge and communicative use is strengthened.

### 3. *Mufradat* and Example Sentences as Input and Scaffolding

The language section (*qism al-lughah*) provides new vocabulary (*mufradat*) every day. Students receive approximately three to five new words daily, and for first-year students the words are accompanied by examples of their use in sentences. This shows that the *pesantren* does not only impose language obligations but also provides the linguistic resources needed to fulfil them.

Daily provision of three to five words is a planned and gradual form of input. Its importance lies less in the number of words than in the consistency of delivery and the opportunity to use the words in daily life. For first-year students, example sentences function as linguistic scaffolding: new students need not only the meaning of a word but also a model of how to use it in speech. Scaffolding, in the original sense of Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976), is the support that enables a novice to accomplish a task beyond his or her unassisted effort; in bilingual education, it refers to support that allows learners to engage with content in a language they have only partially mastered (Ertugruloglu et al., 2023). Example sentences narrow the gap between knowing a word and producing it, which matters because institutional demands can feel overwhelming to new students who lack linguistic resources.

### 4. *Jasus* and Sanctions as Maintenance Mechanisms

Compliance with the language rules is supported by language monitors (*jasus*). The data show two forms. The first is the peer *jasus*: in principle, every student may record and report violations committed by fellow students to the language section. The second is the special *jasus*, appointed by the language section to monitor violations confidentially. Monitoring thus operates at two levels: horizontal monitoring among peers and structural monitoring by appointed monitors with a specific mandate. This arrangement extends the reach of the policy because enforcement does not depend solely on the presence of teachers or administrators.

Students who use Indonesian or a regional language on English or Arabic days are subject to sanctions in accordance with the boarding school's regulations. The use of the target languages is therefore not driven by individual motivation alone but is reinforced by institutional consequences. The rules define the expected behaviour, *jasus* identify violations, the language section follows them up, and sanctions provide consequences. This study did not document the types and levels of sanctions in detail, so their form and impact should not be assumed to be identical to those reported in other *pesantren*.

### 5. Free Language Day as Linguistic Flexibility

Sunday is designated as a free language day on which students may use any language without sanction. The system at Bi'tsatul Islamiyah therefore does not impose complete language control throughout the week: six days of regulation are balanced by one day of flexibility. The free day forms part of the temporal cycle of the language environment, completing the sequence of English days, Arabic days, and the free day.

## Discussion

### A Seven-Component Model of Language Environment Construction

Taken together, the findings show that *bi'ah lughawiyyah* at Bi'tsatul Islamiyah is constructed through seven interrelated components, summarised in Table 2.

**Table 2. Components of Bi'ah Lughawiyyah Construction at Bi'tsatul Islamiyah**

| Component   | Practice                                         | Function                           |
|-------------|--------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Regulation  | Arabic and English as languages of communication | Setting norms                      |
| Temporality | English days and Arabic days                     | Distributing practice time         |
| Input       | Three to five new words per day                  | Providing linguistic resources     |
| Scaffolding | Example sentences for first-year students        | Supporting initial production      |
| Space       | Classrooms and dormitories                       | Extending practice into daily life |
| Control     | <i>Jasus</i> and sanctions                       | Maintaining consistency            |
| Flexibility | Free language day                                | Allowing language choice           |

Source: Analysis of observation and interview data

These components show that the language environment is not the product of a single programme but of the relationships among its elements. Regulation requires input; input requires space for practice; practice requires monitoring to ensure that the rules are observed; monitoring

requires follow-up; and the whole system requires flexibility so that language life is not reduced to rules. This marks a shift from the idea of a "language programme" to that of a "language ecosystem". A programme consists of specific activities, whereas an ecosystem consists of the relationships among activities, actors, space, time, norms, and practices (van Lier, 2004). Analytically, the process can be summarised in the following sequence:

*Institutional policy → language regulation → input (mufradat) → scaffolding → practice in classroom and dormitory → jasus monitoring → sanctions → repetition and habituation → internalisation of norms → bilingual communication culture*

The *pesantren* first establishes the languages and the times at which they are used, which sets the norms. The language section then provides input through vocabulary and example sentences, and this input can be practised because the target languages are required in both classroom and dormitory. As practice continues, *jasus* monitor compliance, and violations are reported and sanctioned. If this cycle is consistent and accompanied by meaningful interaction, language use may move from rule-governed behaviour to habit. The internalisation stage, however, should be understood as a theoretical interpretation rather than a directly measured finding. The available data show a system of habituation and monitoring, but they are not sufficient to confirm that all students have internalised the language norms.

### ***Qism al-Lughah: Linking Learning and Discipline***

The findings show that the language section has a dual function. Pedagogically, it provides vocabulary and examples of its use; in its regulatory capacity, it monitors language use and follows up violations. The two functions complement each other: *mufradat* provides the means, while the disciplinary system encourages their use. This relationship can be explained through the sequence of input, interaction, output, and feedback (Gass, 2017). Vocabulary serves as lexical input, classrooms and dormitories provide opportunities for interaction, the use of vocabulary generates output, and correction from peers or the language section provides feedback. When new words are immediately used in conversation, receptive knowledge has a chance to develop into productive use, which Nation (2013) treats as a distinct and more demanding stage of vocabulary learning.

This pattern is consistent with Almuzakir et al. (2023), who found that the language section of a modern *pesantren* combines vocabulary delivery, speaking practice, supervision, and a

language court, and with Muttaqin et al. (2024), who describe the language environment as a means of capturing input, interaction, and output. In Spolsky's (2009) terms, the language section acts as the agent of language management within the *pesantren* domain. It is not merely an administrative unit but an actor that manages linguistic resources, oversees practice, and connects rules to everyday life, thereby maintaining continuity between learning goals and the communication culture of the community.

### **The Classroom–Dormitory Ecosystem**

The application of the language rules in both classrooms and dormitories marks a shift from classroom-based to environment-based language learning. Classrooms provide structured learning, while dormitories provide space for spontaneous practice, and this difference in function allows the two settings to complement each other. Hamid et al. (2008) and Muttaqin et al. (2024) similarly show that formal and informal environments offer complementary opportunities for input and interaction, and Rahmawati et al. (2022) report that the language environment at Darul Huffadh Islamic Boarding School in Bone supported students' Arabic learning by combining classroom instruction with language activities outside class. At Bi'tsatul Islamiyah, extending the obligation into the dormitory is crucial because language rules lose much of their force if they apply only in the classroom. Once the obligation enters the dormitory, the target language becomes part of social life: it is used not only because the teacher asks for it but because it is the expected medium of interaction in the community.

The scheduled allocation of days should not, however, be read as evidence of improved proficiency, since such a claim would require measured performance data. The findings are more appropriately read as evidence of a structured opportunity to use the language. Research on the distribution of practice suggests that the way exposure is scheduled can itself influence second language learning outcomes (Serrano, 2022), which makes the effect of the three-day rotation a relevant question for further study.

### **Discipline, Support, and Student Agency**

One analytical contribution of this study is to show that the formation of *bi'ah lughawiyyah* occurs through a combination of support and discipline. *Mufradat* and example sentences provide support, while obligations, *jasus*, and sanctions provide discipline. If only the disciplinary aspect

is considered, the system may appear coercive; if only vocabulary activities are considered, the institutional aspects that make the language actually used are overlooked. Within this framework, *jasus* are not merely fault-finders and sanctions are not merely punishment; both are maintenance mechanisms that keep language policy present in everyday interaction. Rizqi (2019) similarly found that the awareness of being observed by *jasus* encouraged students to use the target languages, and Febriyanti et al. (2021) showed that educational punishment combined with rewards was used to sustain a bilingual area.

The *jasus* mechanism nevertheless requires critical examination. Distributing monitoring among students broadens the reach of social control, but it may also create relational tensions among students. Foucault's (1977) account of disciplinary power, in which observation and normalising judgement produce self-regulating subjects, offers a theoretical lens for interpreting such mechanisms. However, because this study did not explore the experiences of students who reported or were reported, the social and psychological effects of the mechanism cannot be concluded from the data. Compliance is not the same as competence: sustained language use also requires vocabulary, language models, self-confidence, interaction, and environmental support. The success of *bi'ah lughawiyyah* should therefore not be measured by the severity of sanctions but by whether the system creates sufficient communication opportunities, provides linguistic resources, builds confidence, and enables the target language to function as a means of communication.

The free language day can be read in the same light. Its presence should not be interpreted directly as evidence that students experience relief or increased motivation, since the study did not measure their psychological experience; a more cautious description is a space of linguistic flexibility. The finding is nevertheless significant because it shows that *bi'ah lughawiyyah* is not necessarily synonymous with monolingualism. The two target languages are given separate time domains, while other languages are allocated a specific day. The system is therefore more accurately described as scheduled bilingual language management than as a monolingual Arabic environment.

## Position of the Findings and Limitations

The findings reinforce several previous studies while offering a different emphasis. First, the findings on classrooms and dormitories support the view that formal and informal environments work complementarily (Muttaqin et al., 2024; Rahmi et al., 2024). Second, the English-day and Arabic-day system resembles the language-day practices reported in other *pesantren* (Ruswatie et al., 2021), indicating that temporal arrangement is a recognised language management strategy. Third, the findings on vocabulary support studies that treat vocabulary delivery as essential input (Almuzakir et al., 2023), but this study shows more clearly the link between vocabulary and language obligations: vocabulary is not given merely to be memorised but serves as capital that enables students to meet their communicative obligations. Fourth, the findings on *jasus* support Rizqi (2019), while the two-tier division into peer and special monitors provides a more specific picture of how monitoring is distributed within the community. Fifth, the free language day shows that a bilingual environment can build flexibility into its schedule. The novelty of this study, therefore, does not lie in any single element, since most of them are known in *pesantren* education, but in how the elements are connected and in the formulation of this connection as a model of input, opportunity, control, habituation, and flexibility.

This study has limitations. The data rely mainly on the accounts of students and alumni and on observation, and do not include measurements of language proficiency. The types and levels of sanctions were not documented in detail, and the experiences of students subjected to monitoring were not specifically explored. Future research could combine ethnographic observation with proficiency assessment, examine students' strategies for dealing with the rules, and compare formal compliance with spontaneous language use.

## Conclusion

This study shows that *bi'ah lughawiyyah* at the Bi'tsatul Islamiyah Islamic Boarding School is constructed through a planned bilingual system that is applied throughout boarding-school life. English is used from Monday to Wednesday, Arabic from Thursday to Saturday, and Sunday is a free language day. For six days a week, the use of Indonesian and regional languages is restricted, and the policy extends from the classroom to the dormitory so that the target languages acquire a communicative function in everyday life.

The system is reinforced by the language section, which provides three to five new words every day; for first-year students, the words are accompanied by example sentences that serve as linguistic scaffolding. Consistent practice is maintained through peer and special *jasus*, which extend the reach of monitoring, and through sanctions that maintain discipline. These mechanisms are not learning objectives in themselves but instruments that sustain the continuity of the language rules.

Overall, the construction of *bi'ah lughawiyyah* at Bi'tsatul Islamiyah can be formulated through seven components: language regulation, time management, input through *mufradat*, scaffolding through example sentences, the extension of practice from classroom to dormitory, monitoring and sanctions, and flexibility through the free language day. The relationships among these components show that the language environment is a deliberately constructed socio-linguistic ecosystem rather than one that emerges spontaneously. The main contribution of the study is to show that a language environment is formed through a balance between linguistic support and language discipline. This model may serve as a starting point for understanding bilingual environments in other *pesantren*, with due attention to the context and culture of each institution.

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