
Jurnal Penelitian Pendidikan

<https://journal.unnes.ac.id/journals/JPP>

Language Festival as a CLIL-Based Learning Model: Enhancing Arabic Proficiency in Islamic Boarding School Context

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Abstract

This study investigates the implementation of a Language Festival as a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)-based model in enhancing Arabic proficiency within an Islamic boarding school context. Conducted at the female campus of Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor during its 100th anniversary celebration, this research employs a qualitative case study design involving students, teachers, and festival organizers. Data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that the Language Festival functions as an authentic learning environment that significantly improves students' Arabic communicative competence, particularly in speaking fluency, vocabulary development, and confidence. In addition, the model fosters learners' motivation, engagement, and higher-order thinking skills through integrated content-based activities such as speeches, debates, and drama. The study also highlights the importance of contextual factors, including institutional culture and immersive language environment, in determining the effectiveness of CLIL implementation. However, challenges remain in balancing language and content integration, as well as in addressing variations in students' proficiency levels. This study contributes to the growing body of CLIL research by proposing a festival-based learning model that is contextually relevant and pedagogically innovative for Islamic education. The findings offer both theoretical and practical implications for the development of integrated language learning approaches in similar educational settings.

Keywords: Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL); Language Festival; Arabic proficiency; Islamic boarding school; communicative competence; experiential learning

INTRODUCTION

In the context of increasing globalization and transnational interaction, proficiency in foreign languages—particularly Arabic and English—has become a strategic competence in contemporary Islamic education. Modern Islamic boarding schools such as Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor (PMDG) have long emphasized language mastery through immersive environments and communicative practices embedded in daily student life. However, a persistent challenge remains: how to enhance students' language proficiency in a way that is contextual, meaningful, and sustainable, rather than limited to structural or memorization-based approaches.

One pedagogical approach that has gained significant attention in global scholarship is Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), which integrates subject matter content and target language learning simultaneously (Coyle et al., 2021). In this approach, language is not merely an object of instruction, but a medium for constructing knowledge, thereby promoting authentic language use in real-life contexts. Recent studies indicate that CLIL significantly contributes to improving learners' communicative competence, particularly in productive skills such as speaking (Reynaert, 2024). A recent

meta-analysis further confirms that CLIL has a positive impact on language acquisition outcomes across educational levels (Educational Research Review, 2025). Additionally, CLIL-based instruction has been found to reduce foreign language anxiety and enhance learners' confidence in using the target language (López-Medina & Casado, 2024).

Nevertheless, the effectiveness of CLIL is not uniformly consistent. Some studies suggest that its impact is influenced by variables such as learner selection, teacher preparedness, and instructional design (Goris et al., 2019; Learning and Instruction, 2021). These findings imply that the success of CLIL largely depends on context-sensitive implementation and pedagogical innovation, particularly in unique educational environments such as Islamic boarding schools, where religious values, communal living, and formal–informal learning integration shape the educational experience.

In this regard, the Language Festival organized by PMDG Female Campus as part of the 100th anniversary celebration of Gontor represents a compelling pedagogical practice worth investigating. The festival functions not merely as a competitive event, but as an authentic language-learning environment where students engage in various content-based activities such as speech, drama, debate, and academic presentations. These activities align closely with the CLIL framework, particularly the integration of content, communication, cognition, and culture (the 4Cs framework) in a holistic learning experience.

Despite the growing body of CLIL research, empirical studies examining language festivals as a CLIL-based learning model in Islamic boarding school contexts remain scarce. This gap is even more evident in the context of Arabic language learning, which has received relatively less attention compared to English in CLIL research (Hao & Yamada, 2021). Therefore, this study aims to explore how a Language Festival can function as a CLIL-based learning model in enhancing students' Arabic proficiency within an Islamic boarding school setting.

Specifically, this study seeks to address the following research questions: (1) How is the Language Festival implemented as a CLIL-based practice in the pesantren context? and (2) To what extent does this model contribute to the enhancement of students' Arabic language proficiency? By doing so, this research is expected to contribute theoretically to the contextual development of CLIL in Islamic education and practically to pedagogical innovation in language learning within boarding school environments.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the implementation of the Language Festival as a CLIL-based learning model in enhancing students' Arabic proficiency within an Islamic boarding school context. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate as it allows an in-depth understanding of complex educational phenomena situated in a specific socio-cultural setting, particularly in examining how language learning is embedded in authentic activities (Prastyo et al., 2024). Case study design was specifically selected because it enables the researcher to investigate a bounded system—namely the Language Festival event at PMDG Female Campus—through detailed, contextualized analysis of participants' experiences and pedagogical practices (Marshallina, 2026).

The participants of this study consisted of selected students, language instructors, and organizing committees involved in the Language Festival. Purposive sampling was used to identify participants who were actively engaged in Arabic language activities such as speech, debate, and drama performances. This sampling strategy is widely used in CLIL research to capture rich and relevant data from individuals directly involved in bilingual or integrated learning practices (Khafshoh et al., 2025).

Data were collected through multiple techniques, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Observations were conducted during festival activities to examine how CLIL principles—particularly the integration of content, communication, cognition, and culture (4Cs framework)—were enacted in real learning situations. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with students and teachers to explore their perceptions, experiences, and challenges in using Arabic within festival-based activities. In addition, documents such as event guidelines, scoring rubrics, and students' performance scripts were analyzed to provide supporting evidence. The use of multiple data sources enhances the credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative research through triangulation (Norhasanah & Setiawan, 2023).

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, involving data reduction, coding,

categorization, and interpretation to identify emerging patterns related to CLIL implementation and language development outcomes. This analytical approach is commonly employed in CLIL studies to capture both pedagogical processes and language learning impacts (Warnia & Tarihoran, 2026) . To ensure the validity of the findings, the study applied techniques such as data triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing, which are recommended in qualitative educational research to enhance rigor and reliability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that the implementation of the Language Festival at PMDG Female Campus functioned effectively as a CLIL-based learning model, particularly in fostering students' Arabic language proficiency through authentic and contextualized learning experiences. The results are organized into three major themes: (1) enhancement of Arabic communicative competence, (2) increased learning motivation and engagement, and (3) development of higher-order thinking and intercultural awareness.

First, the Language Festival significantly contributed to the improvement of students' Arabic communicative competence, particularly in speaking fluency, vocabulary expansion, and confidence in oral performance. Observational data indicated that students actively used Arabic in various performance-based activities such as speeches (*khiṭābah*), debates (*munāẓarah*), and drama (*masrahiyyah*). Interview data further revealed that students perceived the festival as a “real space to practice Arabic without fear,” allowing them to use language meaningfully rather than mechanically. This finding aligns with recent CLIL research demonstrating that increased exposure to authentic language use leads to significant gains in linguistic outcomes, especially in productive skills (Annova et al., 2025; Iqbal et al., 2025) . Moreover, systematic evidence suggests that CLIL learners generally outperform non-CLIL learners in vocabulary development and spontaneous oral production due to greater language exposure and contextual use (Frontiers in Education, 2024) .

Second, the study found that the Language Festival enhanced students' motivation and engagement in learning Arabic. Students reported feeling more enthusiastic and challenged due to the competitive yet collaborative nature of the festival. The integration of content (themes of Islamic knowledge, culture, and global issues) with language use created a meaningful learning environment that increased intrinsic motivation. Observational findings showed high levels of participation, peer interaction, and sustained attention during activities. This supports previous findings that CLIL promotes active learning, engagement, and motivation by integrating cognitive and communicative dimensions in learning tasks (Warnia & Tarihoran, 2026) . Furthermore, CLIL-based instruction has been shown to reduce language anxiety and improve learners' confidence, which was also evident in students' willingness to perform publicly during the festival (Nemt-allah et al., 2025) .

Third, the Language Festival facilitated the development of higher-order thinking skills and intercultural awareness, which are core components of the CLIL framework. Students were required not only to use Arabic linguistically but also to process content critically, such as constructing arguments in debates, interpreting cultural themes in drama, and delivering structured ideas in speeches. Document analysis of scoring rubrics showed an emphasis on content understanding, argumentation, and creativity alongside linguistic accuracy. This finding is consistent with CLIL literature emphasizing that integrated learning supports cognitive development and promotes deeper understanding through meaningful language use (Marhamah, 2024) . Additionally, the inclusion of cultural elements in performances reflects the “culture” dimension of the CLIL 4Cs framework, although previous studies note that this dimension is often underrepresented in practice (Warnia & Tarihoran, 2026) .



Figure 1. The Language Festival

However, the findings also identified several challenges in implementing the Language Festival as a CLIL-based model. These include variations in students' language proficiency levels, limited preparation time, and uneven teacher guidance in integrating content and language objectives. Some participants reported difficulties in balancing linguistic accuracy with content delivery, which is a common issue in CLIL contexts. Previous studies similarly highlight challenges such as teacher readiness, assessment complexity, and the need for pedagogical training in CLIL implementation (Warnia & Tarihoran, 2026; Marhamah, 2024). Despite these challenges, the overall findings indicate that the Language Festival provides a highly effective, context-sensitive model of CLIL that aligns with the unique characteristics of Islamic boarding school education.

In sum, the results demonstrate that the Language Festival is not merely an extracurricular activity but functions as a pedagogically meaningful CLIL-based learning environment, contributing significantly to students' Arabic proficiency, motivation, and cognitive development. These findings reinforce the growing body of evidence that CLIL, when implemented through authentic and culturally embedded practices, can produce multidimensional learning outcomes in language education.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that the Language Festival functions as an effective CLIL-based pedagogical model, particularly in enhancing Arabic communicative competence through authentic, performance-based learning. This result reinforces a well-established argument in CLIL research that language acquisition is significantly improved when learners are exposed to meaningful and context-rich language use, rather than isolated linguistic instruction. Empirical evidence suggests that CLIL environments provide greater exposure to the target language, leading to measurable gains in vocabulary development, oral production, and communicative fluency (Pérez-Cañado et al., 2024; Frontiers in Education, 2024). In this study, the Language Festival extends this principle by embedding language use in culturally relevant and socially meaningful activities, thus demonstrating that CLIL can be effectively localized within Islamic boarding school contexts.

However, the findings also require a more critical interpretation. While the improvement in Arabic proficiency aligns with global CLIL outcomes, it is important to note that recent meta-analyses reveal that CLIL's effectiveness is often more pronounced in language development than in content mastery (Educational Research Review, 2025). This nuance is reflected in the present study, where students demonstrated strong communicative gains but occasionally struggled to balance linguistic accuracy with content depth. This suggests that while the Language Festival successfully operationalizes the "communication" dimension of CLIL, further pedagogical refinement is needed to strengthen the "content" dimension, particularly in academic discourse and conceptual understanding.

Moreover, the increased motivation and engagement observed in this study resonate with the widely held assumption that CLIL fosters positive affective outcomes. The competitive and performative nature of the Language Festival created a highly engaging learning environment, supporting previous findings that CLIL promotes active participation and intrinsic motivation (Sudarso et al., 2024; Dzulkurnain et al.,

2024) . Nevertheless, longitudinal evidence suggests that the motivational impact of CLIL may not be solely attributable to the approach itself, but rather influenced by learners' prior language proficiency and contextual factors (System, 2024) . This implies that the success of the Language Festival is not only due to its CLIL structure, but also to the strong linguistic culture and immersive environment already established in the pesantren system.

From a cognitive perspective, this study supports the claim that CLIL enhances higher-order thinking skills through integrated learning tasks. Students' involvement in debates, drama, and public speaking reflects the "cognition" dimension of the CLIL 4Cs framework, where language is used as a tool for reasoning and knowledge construction. This aligns with recent literature emphasizing that CLIL facilitates critical thinking, problem-solving, and deeper learning through meaningful language use (Warnia & Tarihoran, 2026; Marhamah, 2024) . Importantly, this study extends these findings by demonstrating that such cognitive engagement can be effectively embedded within religious and cultural content, thereby bridging linguistic competence with Islamic intellectual traditions.

Another significant contribution of this study lies in its emphasis on the "culture" dimension of CLIL, which is often underexplored in empirical research. The integration of Islamic values, cross-cultural themes, and identity formation within Language Festival activities reflects a more holistic interpretation of CLIL as not merely a linguistic or cognitive model, but also a cultural and ideological framework. This aligns with emerging perspectives that view CLIL as a multilingual and sociocultural practice rather than a purely instructional approach (Learning and Instruction, 2025) . In this regard, the pesantren context provides a unique contribution by demonstrating how CLIL can support not only language learning but also value-based education and intercultural awareness grounded in Islamic principles.

Despite these strengths, several challenges identified in this study highlight ongoing tensions in CLIL implementation. Consistent with previous research, issues such as unequal language proficiency, limited teacher training, and difficulties in integrating content and language objectives remain significant barriers (Marhamah, 2024; Dzulkurnain et al., 2024) . These findings suggest that the sustainability of the Language Festival as a CLIL model depends on systematic pedagogical support, including teacher professional development, structured scaffolding strategies, and more balanced assessment frameworks that integrate both language and content outcomes.

In summary, this study contributes to the growing body of CLIL research by demonstrating that a festival-based learning model can serve as an effective and contextually relevant implementation of CLIL in Islamic boarding schools. While the findings confirm the strengths of CLIL in enhancing language proficiency, motivation, and cognitive engagement, they also underscore the importance of contextual adaptation, pedagogical balance, and institutional support. Thus, the Language Festival represents not only a pedagogical innovation but also a context-sensitive model of CLIL that integrates language, culture, and values in a holistic educational experience.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the Language Festival organized at PMDG Female Campus serves as an effective and context-sensitive CLIL-based learning model for enhancing students' Arabic proficiency in Islamic boarding school settings. By integrating authentic language use with content-rich activities such as speech, debate, and drama, the festival creates a meaningful learning environment that promotes communicative competence, vocabulary development, and speaking fluency. Beyond linguistic gains, the model also fosters students' confidence and willingness to use Arabic in real communicative situations, demonstrating that language learning becomes more effective when embedded in socially and culturally relevant practices.

At a broader level, the findings affirm that CLIL is not merely a methodological approach, but a pedagogical framework that requires contextual adaptation. The success of the Language Festival is closely tied to the pesantren ecosystem, which already supports immersive language exposure, discipline, and value-based education. This indicates that the effectiveness of CLIL cannot be separated from institutional culture and learning environment. At the same time, the study highlights the need for a more balanced integration between language and content dimensions, as students' communicative performance occasionally exceeds their depth of conceptual understanding.

The implications of this study are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, this research contributes to the expansion of CLIL literature by introducing a festival-based learning model within an Islamic educational context, an area that remains underexplored in global scholarship. It also reinforces the relevance of the CLIL 4Cs framework by demonstrating how content, communication, cognition, and culture can be holistically integrated in non-formal and semi-formal learning spaces. Practically, the findings suggest that educators and institutions can adopt similar festival-based approaches as an innovative strategy to enhance language learning, particularly in environments where formal classroom instruction alone is insufficient to develop communicative competence.

However, the sustainability and scalability of this model depend on several critical factors. These include the need for systematic teacher training in CLIL pedagogy, the development of integrated assessment tools that balance language and content outcomes, and the provision of structured scaffolding for students with varying proficiency levels. Future research is recommended to explore the long-term impact of festival-based CLIL models, including quantitative measurement of language gains and comparative studies across different educational contexts. By addressing these aspects, the Language Festival model has the potential to evolve into a replicable and transformative approach in language education within and beyond Islamic boarding schools.

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