Improving Arabic Learning Outcomes through the Implementation of the Small Group Discussion Strategy

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Abstract:
Arabic language learning in Indonesian secondary schools continues to face challenges, particularly low student engagement and limited communicative competence. Although collaborative learning strategies such as Small Group Discussion (SGD) have been widely discussed, empirical research on their application at the Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTs) level within a Classroom Action Research (CAR) context remains limited. This study addresses this specific research gap by examining the effectiveness of the SGD strategy in improving Arabic learning outcomes and student activeness among Grade 7A students at Madrasah Tsanawiyah Negeri 3 Ngawi. The study employed a Classroom Action Research design based on the Kemmis and McTaggart model, conducted in two cycles involving planning, action, observation, and reflection. Data were collected through observation sheets, achievement tests, and student questionnaires. Data were analyzed using descriptive quantitative techniques, including mean scores and percentage improvements, supported by qualitative analysis of classroom observations and reflective notes. The results show substantial improvement in both achievement and engagement. The average score increased from 76.3 in Cycle I to 93 in Cycle II, while student enthusiasm rose from 70.1% to 92%. These findings confirm that SGD effectively promotes interactive, student-centered Arabic learning and enhances both academic performance and classroom participation.

Introduction

Language is a fundamental medium of human communication, enabling individuals to express ideas, thoughts, and emotions (Noermanzah, 2019). In contemporary education, particularly within the framework of 21st-century learning, language instruction is increasingly expected to foster not only linguistic competence but also communication, collaboration, and

critical thinking skills. Within Islamic education, Arabic holds a unique and essential position as the language of the Qur'an and the primary medium for accessing Islamic sciences, making Arabic instruction a core component of students' religious and intellectual development (Al-Ghalayini, 1983). Madrasah Tsanawiyah Negeri 3 Ngawi, established in 1954, integrates Arabic as a compulsory subject and aims to develop students who are intellectually capable, morally upright, and spiritually grounded (Ahmad, 2013; Luthfi, 2022). However, preliminary classroom observations conducted on February 7, 2025, revealed persistent instructional challenges in Grade 7A. Students demonstrated low motivation, limited participation, minimal interaction, and unsatisfactory academic performance, with most scores ranging from 40 to 50, well below the minimum mastery standard of 70. These conditions reflect a learning environment that remains teacher-centred mainly and insufficiently responsive to students' learning needs (Akla, 2011).

Recent studies in language pedagogy emphasize the importance of student-centred, collaborative approaches to improve engagement and achievement. Cooperative learning enhances motivation and collaboration (Rahmawati, 2020). Task-based learning strengthens communicative competence (Hassan, 2018), and discussion-based methods promote meaningful interaction and critical thinking (Fauziyah, 2021). Among these, the Small Group Discussion (SGD) strategy has gained recognition for its ability to stimulate active participation, self-expression, and deeper understanding (E. Widiastuti, 2021; Zuriati, 2022).

However, most existing studies have focused on general education or non-Arabic-language contexts, with limited empirical investigation of the application of SGD in Arabic instruction at the junior secondary level, particularly in Indonesian Islamic schools. Furthermore, previous research has rarely examined learning activeness and learning outcomes simultaneously as complementary indicators of instructional effectiveness. This lack of context-specific evidence constitutes a clear research gap, especially considering the continued dominance of lecture-based and rote memorization practices in many Arabic classrooms.

Therefore, this study is designed to address this gap by examining the implementation of the Small Group Discussion strategy in a real classroom setting at MTsN 3 Ngawi. The primary objective of the study is to investigate the effectiveness of SGD in improving both students' learning outcomes and learning activeness in Arabic instruction for Grade 7A during the 2025–2026 academic year. Specifically, this study seeks to determine whether SGD significantly enhances students' academic achievement and increases their active participation in the learning process.

By responding directly to current educational demands for interactive, student-centred learning, this research contributes theoretically to Arabic language pedagogy and, practically, provides teachers with an evidence-based instructional model for creating more engaging, effective, and transformative Arabic classrooms.

Theoretical Framework
Integrative Theoretical Foundation

This study is grounded in an integrative theoretical framework that draws on constructivist learning theory, the sociocultural theory of second language acquisition, and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which collectively view language learning as an active, socially mediated, and meaning-oriented process. These perspectives are particularly relevant to Teaching Arabic as a Foreign Language (TAFL) in Islamic educational institutions,

where interactional opportunities outside the classroom are often limited, and instruction tends to be teacher-centered. To address these challenges, the study emphasizes the need to adopt student-centred pedagogies that foster active participation and engagement, aligning with constructivist principles in Arabic language instruction. Implementing the 3Cs approach, which combines communicative techniques with collaborative learning, can significantly enhance students' engagement and language acquisition in TAFL contexts (Almelhes & Alsaiari, 2024). This approach not only promotes active learning but also fosters the development of critical thinking and communication skills essential to mastering Arabic (Almelhes & Alsaiari, 2024).

Constructivist Perspective on Active Knowledge Construction

From a constructivist perspective, learning occurs when learners actively construct knowledge through engagement and reflection rather than passively receiving information. In Arabic language learning, Small Group Discussion (SGD) enables learners to process linguistic input collaboratively, negotiate meaning, and reorganize their grammatical and lexical knowledge through peer interaction. Empirical studies in second language contexts demonstrate that collaborative discussion promotes deeper cognitive engagement and improved language performance. Consequently, integrating SGD into the 3Cs framework can enhance language proficiency and provide a more meaningful learning experience for students in Arabic language education.

Sociocultural Theory and the Zone of Proximal Development

The framework is further informed by Vygotskian sociocultural theory, particularly the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which emphasizes the role of social interaction and scaffolding in language development. Within SGD activities, learners with higher Arabic proficiency provide linguistic support to less proficient peers, facilitating language development through mediated interaction. Research in L2 classrooms confirms that peer scaffolding significantly enhances speaking and comprehension skills, especially in foreign language settings with limited exposure (Setiadi & Marjuni, 2024). This study highlights the importance of creating a collaborative environment where learners can thrive and effectively develop their language skills, ultimately improving their overall proficiency in Arabic (Setiadi & Marjuni, 2024).

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Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Principles

In addition, this study draws on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) principles, which emphasize meaningful interaction as both the process and objective of language learning. In TAFL contexts, particularly in pesantren or Islamic higher education institutions, SGD creates structured yet authentic communicative spaces where learners practice Arabic for functional purposes, such as expressing opinions, clarifying ideas, and responding to peers (Faryat, 2025). Previous studies indicate that communicative group-based activities increase

learners' fluency, participation, and motivation in Arabic language classrooms and contribute to a more engaging learning environment that aligns with contemporary pedagogical approaches in language education (Muntasir & Akbar, 2023).

Operationalization of Variables within the Framework

Within this framework, Small Group Discussion functions as the independent variable, while Arabic learning outcomes constitute the dependent variables, operationalized through students' learning achievement, classroom participation, learning motivation, and language skills. The framework assumes that well-designed and well-facilitated SGD activities enhance interactional intensity, cognitive engagement, and communicative practice, ultimately leading to improved Arabic learning outcomes in TAFL contexts. The integration of Vygotskian principles and CLT methodologies can significantly transform Arabic language pedagogy, promoting compelling learning experiences in diverse educational settings.

Method

This study aims to improve classroom learning quality by examining the phenomenon of low student achievement in a specific skill area. Therefore, the researcher chose a problem related to the effectiveness of the Small Group Discussion teaching strategy in enhancing students' learning outcomes. This issue was selected for its significance in the contemporary educational context, where teachers continually strive to improve teaching methods and classroom interaction to achieve better results. The choice of this issue is based on field observations showing that many students fail to reach expected performance levels despite having access to adequate learning materials. Hence, Classroom Action Research (CAR) was considered an appropriate methodological approach to bring about direct and sustainable improvement in the learning environment (Al-Abdulkarim, 2016).

The unit of analysis in this study is the learning process and learning outcomes of Grade 7A students at Madrasah Tsanawiyah Negeri 3 Ngawi. This study employs Classroom Action Research using the Kemmis and McTaggart model, which integrates description, analysis, and evaluation in a cyclical process. It is a type of applied research in which the researcher identifies a problem, implements an intervention, and evaluates the outcomes. The Kemmis and McTaggart model consists of two primary cycles, each comprising four stages: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. In Cycle I, the SGD strategy was implemented to introduce collaborative learning and observe its initial effects on student participation and comprehension. Data obtained from observation sheets, learning outcome tests, and student questionnaires were analyzed at the end of the cycle to identify instructional weaknesses and learning obstacles. The Cycle I reflection then served as the basis for revising the teaching strategy. In Cycle II, the revised instructional plan was implemented with improved task design, clearer group procedures, and enhanced teacher facilitation. These modifications were intended to address the limitations identified in Cycle I directly and to promote higher levels of student engagement and academic performance. By systematically linking reflection findings to instructional revisions in the subsequent cycle, the CAR process ensured that each cycle functioned as a continuous improvement mechanism aimed at enhancing both learning activeness and achievement. This model emphasizes the active participation of the researcher, teacher, and students within the classroom context, making research not merely an evaluation process but a continuous development effort (McTaggart, 2014). The data used in this study include classroom observations, students' performance reports, and pre-test and post-test

results, combining both quantitative and qualitative data to reveal the effectiveness of the instructional intervention (Donald Ary, Lucy Cheser Jacobs, 2014).

The data sources were clearly categorized into primary and secondary data. Primary data included classroom observations, learning outcome tests (pre-test and post-test), student questionnaires, and teacher and student interviews. Secondary data consisted of lesson plans, student worksheets, performance records, and classroom documentation. Multiple research instruments were employed, including structured observation sheets, learning achievement tests, questionnaire forms, interview guidelines, and documentation checklists (Creswell, 2018). The data were analyzed using a comparative approach between pre-test and post-test scores, along with descriptive analyses of field notes and reflection records in each research cycle. This process provided a comprehensive understanding of the learning improvement—from problem identification to intervention implementation and ongoing evaluation—thus ensuring that the research contributes to continuous enhancement of teaching and learning quality (Abdelaziz, 2019).

Results and Discussion
Result
1) Learning Activity

Classroom observation data indicate a substantial improvement in students' learning activities following the implementation of the Small Group Discussion (SGD) strategy. In Cycle I, the average level of student activeness reached 70.1%, while in Cycle II it increased to 92%, indicating a strong positive trend.

Table 1. Observation Results of Students' Learning Activity

No.	Description	Number of Students	%	Number of Students	%
		Cycle I	Cycle I	Cycle II	Cycle II
1	Students who were active in learning	17	43%	23	92%
2	Students who paid attention to the teacher's explanation	19	82%	23	92%
3	Students who actively asked questions to the teacher and their peers	12	52%	19	76%
4	Students who stayed awake during the lesson	20	86%	25	100%
5	Students who were able to solve problems	17	43%	20	80%
6	Students who demonstrated high learning enthusiasm	14	60%	25	100%

No.	Description	Number of Students	%	Number of Students	%
7	Students who actively participated in group discussions	16	69%	25	100%
8	Students who listened to others' opinions	14	60%	24	96%

Note. Author document (2025)

Figure 1. Students' Learning Activity Assessment Data
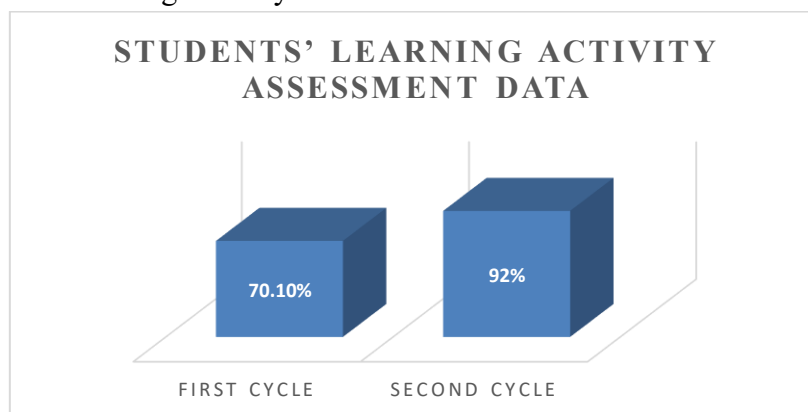

Table 1 and Figure 1 further reveal consistent growth across all activity indicators, including discussion participation, attention to instruction, problem-solving ability, and learning enthusiasm. By Cycle II, nearly all indicators reached very high levels, reflecting a clear shift from moderate to strong student involvement in the learning process.

2) Learning Outcomes

The learning outcomes of the seventh-grade students (Class A) at MTs Negeri 3 Ngawi showed a remarkable increase in the second cycle compared to the first cycle. The data reveal that the students demonstrated noticeable progress in various aspects of the learning process, including classroom participation, attentiveness, and problem-solving ability. This improvement indicates that the instructional strategies implemented during the second cycle were more effective in fostering students' engagement and motivation to learn. The detailed results of their performance can be seen in the following table.

Figure 2. Students' Learning Achievement Assessment Data
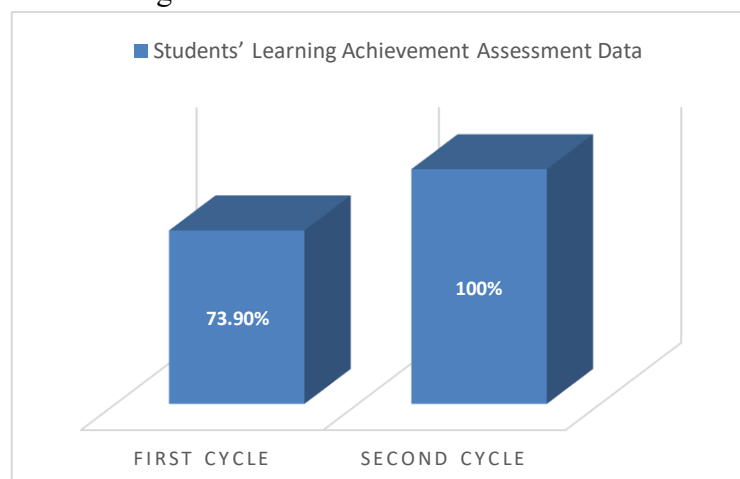
The data above clearly show a significant improvement in students' learning achievement between the first and second cycles. In the first cycle, only 17 out of 23 students (73.9%) met the minimum passing criteria, indicating that several students still faced challenges in understanding the Arabic lesson materials, particularly in grammar and oral expression. However, after revising the learning strategy and implementing the Small Group Discussion approach in the second cycle, all 25 students (100%) successfully achieved the expected learning outcomes, this improvement reflects a strong positive change in academic performance following the instructional revision in the second cycle.

Qualitative Evidence

These quantitative improvements are further reinforced by qualitative evidence obtained from student and teacher interviews. The interview data further support the quantitative findings. Students reported noticeable improvements in their learning experience after implementing the SGD strategy. One student stated that he felt more confident in speaking Arabic because he could practice with his peers before responding in front of the class. Another student explained that group discussions facilitated learning by enabling students to help one another understand complex vocabulary and sentence structures. The Arabic teacher further confirmed the improvement in classroom dynamics by noting that students had become more active and confident in expressing their ideas, and that the overall classroom atmosphere was more lively than in the first cycle. These responses indicate a clear improvement in students' confidence, motivation, and participation during Arabic learning activities.

These qualitative findings are further strengthened by classroom documentation. Classroom documentation, including observation notes and learning artefacts, demonstrates a clear transformation in instructional practice. In Cycle I, the documentation reflects a predominantly teacher-centred environment, with limited student engagement and interaction. In contrast, documentation from Cycle II demonstrates more intensive student interaction, collaborative problem-solving, and a more active use of Arabic during group work.

Figure 3. Instructional Practice

Photographic records illustrate students working cooperatively in small groups, using worksheets, discussing answers, and presenting their ideas. Observation notes further indicate that more students remained focused throughout the lesson and participated voluntarily without teacher prompting. Together, these documented changes reinforce the evidence that implementing the SGD strategy contributed to meaningful improvements in both learning behaviour and academic achievement.

Figure 3. Students' Learning

Overall, three major trends emerged from the results; a strong upward trend in learning activity, as student activeness increased from moderate (70.1%) to very high (92%), complete mastery of learning outcomes, with achievement rising from 73.9% of students meeting the standard to 100%, sustained improvement in classroom dynamics, reflected in increased student confidence, collaboration, and engagement across both quantitative and qualitative data.

Discussion

This study provides novel empirical evidence on the effectiveness of Small Group Discussion in Arabic language instruction, using a Classroom Action Research framework, particularly in improving both learning activities and learning outcomes in a tertiary educational context. The data indicate that students' overall performance in both learning activities and learning outcomes demonstrates a significant and measurable improvement between the first and second rounds of evaluation. In the first round, only 17 of 23 students passed the assessment, for a 73.9% success rate. In contrast, in the second round, all 25 students passed, achieving a perfect 100% success rate. This improvement reflects not only quantitative progress but also qualitative improvements in participation, engagement, and comprehension. The results confirm that implementing small-group discussion and cooperative learning strategies contributed substantially to students' development of critical thinking, interactional competence, and confidence in language use. The findings also highlight the impact of continuous assessment and formative feedback mechanisms, which have been recognized as key factors in promoting active learning and improving academic outcomes (Harianingsih, I., & Jusoh, 2022). Furthermore, the results suggest that when students are given structured opportunities to communicate and negotiate meaning collaboratively, they are more likely to internalize the language being learned, thereby deepening comprehension and long-term retention.

The reflection on these results highlights several underlying factors that contributed to the observed improvement in students' performance. The first and most influential factor is the active integration of small-group discussions, which created a more interactive and student-centred learning environment (Meilasari et al., 2023). This method enabled learners to collaboratively explore linguistic concepts, solve problems, and share knowledge, leading to a

more meaningful learning experience. The findings strongly align with constructivist learning theory, which emphasizes that knowledge is constructed through active engagement and social interaction rather than passive reception (Sastra, A. H., Rahmat, R., & Mujaddidah, 2023). Moreover, the consistent presence of teacher guidance, peer collaboration, and motivational reinforcement throughout the process strengthened the students' sense of belonging and accountability toward their own learning (Jacobs, G. M., & Chau, 2024). The improvement from 73.9% to 100% is not merely a statistical increase but evidence of students' adaptation to the classroom dynamic and their growing confidence in Arabic language use (E. Widiastuti, 2021; I. A. M. Widiastuti, 2023). Additionally, adapting teaching methods to accommodate students' cognitive, affective, and sociocultural needs minimized learning anxiety and improved performance in communicative tasks, particularly speaking and collaborative problem-solving (Dewi, F. R., & Sholikhan, 2024). This indicates that a supportive, interactive classroom climate is essential for sustaining motivation and academic growth.

These findings indicate that active learning approaches—particularly cooperative learning and discussion-based instruction—play a decisive role in shaping both the cognitive and affective domains of student development. Sustained peer interaction and collaborative problem solving directly contributed to deeper conceptual understanding while simultaneously strengthening essential soft skills such as communication, teamwork, empathy, and self-efficacy (Sulistianingsih, T., & Prawiyata, 2023). Furthermore, continuous reflection through feedback and group dialogue enhanced students' self-regulation and metacognitive awareness, enabling them to monitor, evaluate, and adapt their learning strategies more effectively (Setyawan et al., 2024). The attainment of 100% learning achievement in Cycle II, therefore, represents not merely an improvement in academic performance but a fundamental transformation in learning attitudes and classroom behaviour, whereby students shift from passive recipients to proactive, responsible participants in the learning process (Putri, N. I., & Hamzah, 2023). These outcomes demonstrate that well-structured instructional design can generate sustainable changes in learner motivation, engagement, and collective responsibility for learning.

Unlike many previous studies conducted in EFL settings, this study demonstrates that cooperative learning principles are equally powerful in Arabic language classrooms, where communicative confidence and interactional competence are often more challenging to develop. Compared with previous studies, this research's results align with a growing body of literature confirming the effectiveness of cooperative learning in enhancing both linguistic competence and classroom engagement. For instance, Meilasari et al. (2023) found that cooperative learning significantly reduced speaking anxiety among EFL learners, thereby promoting fluency and self-confidence, while Dewi and Sholikhan (2024) emphasized that structured small-group discussions improve interactional fluency and vocabulary recall (Maulani, H., & Faqih, 2021). Similarly, Setyawan et al. (2024) and Putri & Hamzah (2023) discovered that student-centred discussion models promote deeper learning, critical reflection, and greater responsibility for individual progress. The consistency between these findings and the present study suggests that the Small Group Discussion strategy is not only applicable in English or general EFL contexts but also transferable and highly effective in Arabic language instruction. The comparative evidence reinforces the universality of cooperative learning principles across different linguistic and cultural settings, confirming their relevance in 21st-century communicative pedagogy.

Based on these findings, several pedagogical and institutional recommendations can be proposed. These recommendations are grounded in the empirical improvements observed in this study, where student achievement increased from 73.9% in Cycle I to 100% in Cycle II, alongside significant growth in participation and engagement. Conceptually, cooperative and discussion-based learning models should be embedded as core elements within the language curriculum to ensure the development of both linguistic and interpersonal competencies (Tamimy et al., 2023). Methodologically, instructors should design classroom activities that integrate structured discussions, peer review, and collaborative problem-solving while maintaining clear rubrics and periodic reflection sessions to measure learning progress. From a policy standpoint, schools and language departments should adopt a cyclical assessment framework that emphasizes ongoing formative evaluation before summative testing. This approach not only ensures mastery of learning outcomes but also accommodates learners' diverse cognitive paces and learning styles (Carbajal-Licas et al., 2025). Furthermore, teacher training programs should incorporate modules on facilitating cooperative learning, feedback literacy, and reflective teaching to empower educators to sustain such pedagogical innovations (Arefian & Esfandiari, 2024). In summary, creating a classroom culture that values collaboration, reflection, and adaptive assessment will continue to promote sustainable, transformative improvements in learning activities and outcomes across Arabic language education.

Conclusion

This study examined whether implementing the Small Group Discussion (SGD) strategy could improve students' learning activities and outcomes in Arabic instruction. The findings of this study reveal a significant improvement in both students' learning activities and learning outcomes in Arabic language learning after the implementation of the Small Group Discussion (SGD) strategy. During the first cycle, the level of activeness among seventh-grade students (Class A) at MTs Negeri 3 Ngawi averaged 70.1%, and only 73.9% of students met the minimum passing criteria. However, after applying the SGD strategy in the second cycle, students' activeness increased to 92%, and 100% of students achieved passing scores. This remarkable progress indicates that cooperative and student-centred approaches can effectively enhance learners' engagement, motivation, and comprehension in Arabic learning. Furthermore, the data illustrate that consistent feedback, collaborative discussion, and peer learning play vital roles in improving students' participation and performance, leading to an overall transformation in classroom dynamics and student confidence.

Conceptually, this study contributes to the growing body of research supporting the effectiveness of active and collaborative learning strategies in second- or foreign-language education. The findings reaffirm that learning is not merely the transmission of knowledge from teacher to student but a socially constructed process that thrives in interactive and supportive environments. Methodologically, integrating Small Group Discussion as a core teaching approach provides a practical framework for educators seeking to balance language input and output activities. Theoretically, the study strengthens the application of constructivist and cooperative learning principles in Arabic language instruction, providing empirical support for the claim that these pedagogies enhance both cognitive and affective outcomes. This research thus underscores the importance of designing Arabic language classes that prioritize collaboration, self-expression, and meaningful interaction. More importantly, this study makes

a novel contribution to Arabic language pedagogy by demonstrating that cooperative learning principles—previously dominant in EFL research—are equally powerful in Arabic language classrooms, where developing communicative confidence and interactional competence is often more challenging.

In practical terms, this study provides clear implications for Arabic language teachers. The findings indicate that designing lessons around structured peer discussion, collaborative problem-solving, and reflective feedback can substantially improve both learning processes and learning outcomes. Teachers are therefore encouraged to adopt cooperative learning models not merely as supplementary activities but as core instructional strategies in Arabic classrooms to promote sustainable learner engagement and achievement.

Despite the promising results, this study acknowledges several limitations that could be addressed in future research. First, the study was limited to a single class and had a relatively small sample size, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to broader educational contexts. Second, the research focused primarily on short-term learning improvements, without examining long-term knowledge retention or the sustainability of the observed engagement. Third, external factors, such as students' language backgrounds, socio-economic status, and teachers' proficiency in implementing the strategy, were not fully controlled. Therefore, future studies are encouraged to conduct longitudinal research with more diverse samples and to integrate quantitative instruments, such as standardized tests or motivation scales, to more rigorously validate outcomes. These future directions will help build a more comprehensive understanding of how cooperative learning strategies shape Arabic language proficiency and learner development across varied educational settings. Therefore, future studies are recommended to involve larger, more diverse samples, extend the implementation period, and employ additional quantitative instruments, such as standardized achievement tests and motivation scales, to strengthen the validity and generalizability of the findings.

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Author Contributions

Alfy Mamduh Nuruddin: conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, data curation, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing, project administration. Riza Nurlaila: conceptualization, methodology, investigation, writing – review & editing, validation. Nurhalimah. S: methodology, investigation, resources, data curation, writing – original draft. Luthfi Muhyiddin: methodology, formal analysis, writing – review & editing, visualization. Aufa Alfian Musthofa: investigation, data curation, writing – review & editing, validation.

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