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Phonological Interference of Cirebon Language on the Pronunciation of Hijaiyah Letters

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Abstract

This study investigates the phonological interference of the Cirebon language on the pronunciation of Hijaiyah letters among students at MA NU Putra Buntet Cirebon. Based on phonetic observation and qualitative interviews, the research identifies systematic patterns of mispronunciation, particularly involving pharyngeal, uvular, and emphatic consonants such as /ḥ/, /ʕ/, /q/, and /ṣ/. These deviations arise from the absence of corresponding phonemes in the Cirebon language, leading to substitution, simplification, and assimilation processes that reshape the original Arabic sounds. The findings reveal that the Cirebonese phonological system exerts a strong influence on the learners' production of Arabic phonemes, demonstrating how local linguistic structures mediate the acquisition of a non-native phonetic inventory. Unlike previous studies on Javanese or Madurese interference, this research highlights the Cirebon language's hybrid phonological features—shaped by both Javanese and Sundanese influences—which create distinctive articulation patterns not found in other regional dialects. The study contributes to the broader understanding of cross-linguistic phonological transfer in multilingual Muslim communities and extends empirical evidence on how regional phonology affects Arabic sound realization in an Islamic sociolinguistic context.

Keywords: Phonological Interference; Cirebon Language; Hijaiyah Letters; Second Language Acquisition

INTRODUCTION

The Arabic language holds a special position in Islam as it is the language of revelation, worship, and knowledge (Mulyono, 2019). Therefore, the teaching of Arabic in Islamic schools is not only instrumental as a tool for communication but also sacred. One of the fundamental aspects of Arabic language teaching is the ability to pronounce the hijaiyyah letters fluently and accurately (Sa'dudin & Safitri, 2019). Pronunciation errors can lead to significant shifts in meaning, especially in the recitation of the Qur'an and prayers.

In Indonesia, the acquisition of Arabic by students in Islamic schools is influenced by their native language or the regional language they use daily. One form of this influence is phonological interference, which refers to the introduction of sounds from the regional language into the pronunciation of Arabic (Sekarsari et al., 2024). This interference is important to examine because it affects students' phonetic abilities in producing foreign sounds that do not exist in their native languages.

The Cirebon region exhibits a distinctive linguistic profile within the Javanese-speaking area. Although structurally related to Javanese, the Cirebon language integrates strong influences from both Sundanese and Arabic vocabularies (Pujiatna & Kurnia, 2021). Previous studies have observed that numerous Arabic lexical items—particularly those related to Islamic practices such as sholat, puasa, zakat, do'a, and kitab—have been assimilated into everyday Cirebon usage. These borrowings often appear in spoken interactions with notable phonetic and morphological adaptations reflecting local linguistic norms.

While the lexical assimilation of Arabic elements in Cirebonese has been well documented, the phonological dimension of this contact remains underexplored. Existing research on language interference in Indonesia has largely focused on Javanese or Madurese contexts, leaving the Cirebon language—despite its hybrid structure shaped by Javanese, Sundanese, and Islamic linguistic influences—relatively neglected. Phonologically, Cirebonese lacks several key Arabic phonemes such as /ʿ/ (ʿain), /ḥ/, /ṣ/, /ḍ/, and /ṭ/, which often results in systematic pronunciation difficulties among speakers when learning Arabic. For instance, /q/ is typically realized as /k/, /ʿ/ is frequently omitted, and /ḥ/ is replaced by /h/. This indicates a persistent form of phonological interference that operates below the level of conscious awareness among both students and teachers, underscoring the need for linguistic inquiry into the mechanisms of Arabic-Cirebon phonetic interaction.

Previous studies have highlighted this issue. For example, Mulyono found that students in Islamic schools in Java had difficulty pronouncing /ṣ/, /ʿ/, and /q/ due to the absence of equivalent phonemes in their regional language (Mulyono, 2019). Wahid emphasized that errors in the pronunciation of hijaiyyah letters are largely influenced by low phonetic awareness and the dominance of the native language (Wahid, 2020). Mahbubah, in her study of the Madurese dialect, showed systematic substitutions, such as /dzal/ becoming /d/, and /qaf/ becoming /k/ due to the mismatch between the speech organs and the Arabic phoneme system (L. Mahbubah, 2021).

Meanwhile, Ngatipan viewed this interference issue from a pedagogical perspective. He highlighted the lack of explicit phonetic training in Arabic language instruction as the main factor contributing to pronunciation failures (Ngatipan, 2020). Students tend to bring the pronunciation patterns of their regional languages due to the absence of systematic and contextual phonetic training. Novel added a technical dimension by categorizing phonological errors into three main types: substitution, distortion, and omission (Novel, 2020). For instance, distortion of the emphatic sound /ṭ/ into a flat /t/ or omission of the /ʿ/ sound, which is difficult to produce. These findings are important for understanding that, in addition to native language interference, pronunciation errors can also be caused by articulatory limitations and a lack of phonological perception of foreign sounds.

Further research was conducted by Kosim which focused on errors in the pronunciation of makhraj (the articulation points of letters) by Islamic school students (Kosim, 2021). Kosim emphasized the importance of teaching that leads to a deeper understanding of how to articulate Arabic letters from the correct places, which is often overlooked by students. According to Kosim, errors in makhraj are not only caused by phonological interference but also by a lack of understanding of the anatomy of the articulation of hijaiyyah letters. This leads to errors in pronunciation that affect the quality of their recitation, such as mistakes with letters that have specific makhraj like /ṣ/, /ḍ/, and /ʿ/.

It is important to note that regional language interference not only affects the pronunciation of hijaiyyah letters but can also reflect broader sociolinguistic characteristics. Miskiyyah in her article "Sociolinguistic Study of Preachers Using Cirebonan Javanese" identified that the use of the Cirebon language in da'wah contexts often features a mixture of the local language and Arabic, which sometimes leads to pronunciation errors in da'wah (Miskiyyah, 2021). Miskiyyah pointed out that preachers who use Cirebon language in religious communication tend to modify the pronunciation of Arabic letters in ways that are easier for their audiences to understand. While this facilitates communication, it often causes phonological errors that do not align with the standard Arabic pronunciation. The blending of the Cirebon language influence and the use of Arabic in da'wah shows that, in addition to phonological influences, social and cultural factors also shape pronunciation.

What is interesting in the Cirebon context is the ambiguity: on the one hand, many Arabic terms have merged into the local vocabulary; on the other hand, their pronunciation has undergone sound adjustments that deviate from their original form, and this has been carried over into formal Arabic language learning. This means that lexical proximity does not guarantee phonological similarity. For example, the word "ṣalat" is pronounced as "sholat" or "solat" without paying attention to the original sound, and this practice is carried over into the classroom.

This study was conducted at MA NU Putra Buntet Cirebon, an educational institution that plays a significant role in teaching religion and Arabic in the Cirebon region. In this school, Arabic is taught not only as a foreign language but also as the language of religion, practiced in daily life.

However, despite intensive Arabic language instruction, phonological difficulties still exist among students, particularly regarding regional language interference.

To date, there has been no phonological study that specifically examines the interference of the Cirebon language in the pronunciation of Hijaiyah letters among students of Islamic schools, even though the Cirebon language maintains deep historical and cultural ties with Islam and the Arabic language. This research seeks to fill that gap by describing the forms and patterns of phonological deviations that appear in students' pronunciation of Hijaiyah letters as influenced by the Cirebon language; and the linguistic factors that account for these deviations, particularly in relation to the absence of certain phonemes and articulatory features within the Cirebon phonological system. Through this descriptive inquiry, the study aims to provide a detailed account of the interaction between Arabic and Cirebon phonology, thereby enriching the understanding of cross-linguistic sound transfer within Indonesia's multilingual and Islamic sociolinguistic landscape.

METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach, aiming to deeply explore the phenomenon of regional language interference, specifically Cirebon language, in the pronunciation of hijaiyyah letters by students in Islamic schools. This approach allows the researcher to examine the types of pronunciation errors and the factors influencing them through direct field interactions, as well as to understand the underlying linguistic and social contexts.

The research locus is established at MA NU Putra Buntet Cirebon, an Islamic high school located within the well-known Buntet Pesantren, Cirebon Regency. This school was chosen because it represents an educational environment rich in Arabic language practices, both formally in classroom learning and informally in religious activities. Additionally, the majority of students use Cirebon as their native language, making it a relevant site to observe phonological interference in the Arabic language acquisition process.

The subjects of this study consisted of 20 students from the 10th and 11th grades who had received Arabic language instruction and Qur'anic reading training. These groups were selected because they had sufficient exposure to Arabic phonemes, enabling observable instances of phonological interference. In addition to the students, one Arabic language teacher and one Tahsin (Qur'anic recitation) teacher were included as supporting informants to strengthen data triangulation and interpretation.

Data were collected through several techniques (Yin, 2009). First, participatory observation was conducted during classroom activities and Qur'anic reading sessions to examine students' pronunciation of Hijaiyah letters. Second, students were audio-recorded while reading verses or words containing critical Arabic phonemes such as /q/, /ʿ/, /ḥ/, and /ṣ/. These recordings were then transcribed using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) for phonological analysis. Third, semi-structured interviews were carried out with both students and teachers to explore their awareness of Arabic pronunciation and the perceived influence of their native language. Documentation of teaching materials, syllabi, and learning resources was also conducted to contextualize the findings, supported by relevant literature on Arabic phonology and language contact.

The data were analyzed through two complementary approaches: phonological and sociolinguistic. The phonological analysis identified pronunciation errors categorized as substitution, distortion, or omission (Novel, 2020; Kosim, 2021). The sociolinguistic analysis examined how the Cirebon language and local pesantren culture influenced students' articulation of Arabic sounds, in line with Miskiyyah's (2021) findings on phonological adaptation in religious discourse.

To ensure validity, the study applied triangulation of sources (students, Arabic teacher, and Tahsin teacher), triangulation of techniques (recordings, observations, and interviews), and member checking by confirming transcriptions and interpretations with key participants. Peer debriefing with a phonology expert was also employed to review analytical accuracy. This multi-method design ensures the credibility and depth of the findings regarding Cirebonese phonological interference in the pronunciation of Hijaiyah letters.

ANALYSIS

Factors Contributing to Pronunciation Errors of Hijaiyyah Letters

In linguistic studies, particularly within the context of language contact, there exists a phenomenon known as language interference (Weinreich, 2010). Interference occurs when two or more languages come into contact and influence one another in the speech practices of the communities that use them. This phenomenon is a direct consequence of bilingualism or multilingualism within a particular community. Interference can manifest in various forms, ranging from phonological aspects, word forms (morphological), sentence structures (syntax), to word meanings (semantics), and even in the usage of lexicon or vocabulary (S. Mahbubah, 2021).

The concept of language interference was classically explained by Uriel Weinreich in his monumental work *Languages in Contact*. According to Weinreich, interference refers to deviations from the norms of one or more language systems as a result of contact between two languages (Weinreich, 2010). In the sociolinguistic context, this phenomenon is not considered a mistake, but rather a part of the natural process in the dynamics of language and cultural development.

Language interference can occur due to several factors, such as bilingualism, the intensity of cultural and religious contact, social dominance of certain languages, insufficient mastery of one language by speakers, and positive attitudes towards foreign languages (Alifah, 2024). These factors play a significant role in shaping the linguistic dynamics of a society, including that of the Cirebon community.

Errors in the pronunciation of hijaiyyah letters among students do not occur without reason. Based on studies conducted by Fitrianingrum and Aminingsih, several primary factors affect the occurrence of this phenomenon, both internal and external to the students themselves (Fitrianingrum & Aminingsih, 2024).

1. **Perception of Difficulty in Learning Arabic**

One of the fundamental factors causing pronunciation errors is the perception that Arabic is a difficult language to learn. This perception arises because the hijaiyyah letters have distinct graphemic forms and phonological systems that differ from Latin letters, and their pronunciation does not align with the languages used in daily life, such as Indonesian or regional languages like Cirebon. This discrepancy in sound systems is one of the dominant causes of phonetic errors made by students. Nevertheless, since children are still in the phase of phonological development, analyzing these pronunciation errors can provide valuable insights for teachers in designing more effective and adaptive learning strategies that cater to the developmental needs of the students.

2. **Low Interest in Reading Arabic Texts**

A lack of interest in reading hijaiyyah letters also acts as a hindrance. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the high intensity of digital device usage, such as smartphones and tablets, which offer more engaging visual and interactive entertainment compared to reading Arabic texts (Agustiani et al., 2025; Begum & Ahmad, 2025). As a result, children become more distracted by digital media than focused on conventional Arabic language learning. In this context, the integration of technology into innovative teaching methods becomes crucial to keep the learning process relevant and engaging. Support from educators and parents in managing gadget use and creating a conducive learning environment will positively contribute to increasing students' interest and motivation to learn.

3. **Low Self-confidence in Learning**

Psychological factors, particularly students' self-confidence in the process of learning Arabic, also influence the success of hijaiyyah letter pronunciation. Fear of making mistakes and concerns about negative judgments from the environment can hinder students' willingness to practice. This is often worsened by a non-supportive learning environment, especially if it does not provide a safe space for students to experiment with a new language. Therefore, creating a positive, supportive, and participatory learning environment is essential to boost students' self-confidence in learning Arabic.

4. **Influence of the Native Language and Social Environment**

The native language plays a crucial role in second language acquisition. In the case of students from regions where Cirebon is spoken, the habit of communicating in their native language in daily life can lead to phonological interference when they learn Arabic. This occurs because not all phonemes in Arabic have counterparts in their native language, thus requiring a more complex phonetic adaptation process. Furthermore, if the learning environment, both at home and at school,

does not provide optimal support, the acquisition of foreign phonemes can be hindered. Therefore, active involvement from both the school and family is necessary to create a conducive environment for the development of students' phonological skills in learning Arabic.

Cirebon language, as one of the variants of the Javanese language family in the northern coastal area of West Java, shows considerable evidence of the influence of Arabic. This influence primarily manifests in the context of religion, pesantren (Islamic boarding school) education, and the daily lives of the Muslim community in Cirebon (Farihin et al., 2019). Arabic elements that have entered Cirebon language are part of a historically, socially, and culturally driven process of interference.

The influence of Arabic began to enter Cirebon in the 14th to 15th centuries with the spread of Islam in the archipelago (Zarkasyi, 2012). Cirebon is known as one of the early centers of Islamization in Java, particularly through the role of the Wali Songo, such as Sunan Gunung Jati. In this process of Islamization (Rosidin, 2018), Arabic was introduced not only as the language of worship but also as the language of knowledge and a symbol of scholarly status within pesantren.

In this context, the entry of Arabic into Cirebon language can be categorized as the result of a cultural assimilation process. Through religious education, preaching, and pesantren traditions, Arabic vocabulary has undergone adaptation and integration into the local language system (Karim & Tahir, 2022). In many cases, these Arabic words have undergone phonological, semantic, and morphological adjustments to fit the structure of the Cirebon language.

Arabic elements that have entered Cirebon language are clearly evident in several forms, such as Lexical Interference, arabic vocabulary such as *shalat* (prayer), *wudhu* (ablution), *zakat* (charity), *puasa* (fasting), *kitab* (book), *imam* (leader), *ustadz* (teacher), *do'a* (prayer), and *adzan* (call to prayer) have become part of the daily vocabulary in Cirebon. These terms are used not only in religious contexts but also in general social interactions. For example, in Cirebon, sentences like: *"Ustadzé ngajak ngaji bareng sésa maghrib"* (Translation: The *ustadz* invites to study together after Maghrib prayer). The words *ustadzé* and *ngaji* are from Arabic but have integrated into Cirebon syntax and grammar.

Semantic Interference, some Arabic words experience an expansion or narrowing of meaning. For example, the word *kitab* in Arabic generally means "book," but in Cirebon, *kitab* refers specifically to religious books in Arabic used in pesantren. Phonological Interference, the pronunciation of Arabic vocabulary is often adjusted to the phonology of Cirebon language. For example, *dhuhur* is pronounced *duhur*, *adzan* becomes *adan*, or *mu'adhin* becomes *modin*. These sound adaptations reflect the process of alignment to fit the local speakers' pronunciation. Morphological Interference, there are also cases of using Arabic plural forms such as *-in* in *muslimin*, *mu'minin*, *ustadz-in*, which are sometimes used without a full understanding of Arabic grammar but rather as religious markers or signs of respect.

Arabic elements are not only borrowed functionally but also carry symbolic value. The use of Arabic vocabulary often indicates Islamic identity, religious education status, or familiarity with pesantren traditions (Sadat, 2024). In Cirebon society, individuals who use Arabic terms are considered more *alim* (knowledgeable) or more religious. Therefore, Arabic language interference in Cirebon is not merely linguistic but also reflects social symbols and cultural values.

The entry of Arabic elements into Cirebon language serves as a concrete example of a natural, structured, and functional language interference process. This process is driven by intense cultural contact between the local community and Islamic culture, represented by the Arabic language. In the context of Islam, these elements undergo semantic, phonological, and morphological adaptations, ultimately becoming an inseparable part of the Cirebon language system. By understanding this process through the theory of interference, we can not only observe the linguistic dynamics but also trace the historical, social, and spiritual influences that shape the linguistic identity of the Cirebon community.

Phonetic Analysis of Hijaiyyah Letter Pronunciation

Hijaiyyah letters, as the writing and sound system of the Arabic language, possess complex and distinctive phonological characteristics (Robbani & Zaini, 2022). In the context of Arabic language teaching in Indonesia, particularly in the study of the Qur'an, non-native students often experience difficulties in pronouncing certain letters accurately (Susilawati, 2022). These errors not only affect

the phonetic aspect but can also influence the meaning of words and the validity of religious recitations. This study aims to reveal the types of pronunciation errors in hijaiyyah letters and analyze them within the framework of articulatory phonology.

A phonological approach to hijaiyyah letters (Arabic letters) focuses on the sounds (phonemes) represented by each letter and the phonological rules governing the sound system in the Arabic language (Amatullah & Aziza, 2020). In phonology, letters are not merely seen as written symbols but as representations of sounds that serve to distinguish meanings within a language.

Table 1. Phonetic Analysis of Hijaiyyah Letter Pronunciation by Students

No	Arabic Word	Target Letter	Ideal Pronunciation (IPA)	Student Pronunciation (IPA)	Type of Error	Phonetic Analysis	Notes on Local Influence
1	قَدْ	/q/	[qad]	[kad]	Substitution	/q/ → /k/	No uvular plosive /q/ in local phonology
2	غَفُورٌ	/ɣ/	[ɣafuːr]	[gafuːr]	Substitution	/ɣ/ → /g/	Substitution due to articulatory similarity
3	إِنَّ	/ʔ/	[ʔinna]	[inna]	Omission	Glottal stop /ʔ/ omitted	Lack of familiarity with glottal stops
4	خَلَقَ	/x/	[xalaqa]	[halaqa]	Substitution	/x/ → /h/	No uvular fricative /x/ in native language
5	عَالِمٌ	/ʕ/	[ʕaːlimun]	[aːlimun]	Omission	/ʕ/ omitted	No pharyngeal consonant /ʕ/ in L1
6	طَيِّبٌ	/ṭ/	[tˤajjibun]	[tajibun]	Substitution	/ṭ/ → /t/	Emphatic consonants not present in L1
7	صَلَاةٌ	/ṣ/	[sˤalaːtun]	[salaːtun]	Substitution	/ṣ/ → /s/	Inability to distinguish /s/ and /ṣ/

1. قَدْ

In the word قَدْ, the letter *qaf* (/q/) is phonetically classified as a voiced uvular plosive, produced by completely blocking the airflow at the rear of the oral cavity, specifically in the uvular region (Mustafawi, 2017). Ideally, this sound is characterized by a deep, emphatic plosive quality. However, classroom observations reveal that nearly all students pronounce it as /k/, a voiceless velar plosive articulated further forward in the mouth and lighter in quality. This mispronunciation is not incidental but systemic, recurring across various contexts where *qaf* appears.

Interviews with students reveal that they perceive no significant difference between /q/ and /k/. Some even reported that they had never been taught that *qaf* should be pronounced differently from *kaf*. This points to a lack of phonetic awareness concerning Arabic consonants, especially those without direct equivalents in the students' native language.

Linguistically, this error aligns with the theory of phonological transfer, where learners adapt unfamiliar sounds to the phoneme inventory of their first language. In this case, since Cirebonese lacks uvular consonants like /q/, students simplify the articulation by substituting it with the closest familiar sound—/k/. This process is referred to as perceptual-based phoneme substitution.

Additionally, this phenomenon highlights the lack of explicit phonetic instruction in Qur'anic reading or formal Arabic pronunciation. Teachers often emphasize memorization and fluency over

phonemic accuracy, which results in students failing to internalize critical contrasts such as /q/ vs. /k/. Such mispronunciations can have semantic consequences in Arabic. Thus, substituting /q/ with /k/ is not merely a technical error, but a phonological challenge rooted in cross-linguistic differences and a lack of systematic phonetic training in local Islamic education.

2. غَفُورٌ

In the word غَفُورٌ, the letter *ghain* (/ɣ/) is ideally pronounced as a voiced uvular fricative, created by air friction near the uvula while maintaining vocal cord vibration (Mustafawi, 2017). This sound has a deep, heavy quality distinct from the plosive nature of sounds like /g/. However, observations show that most students substitute /ɣ/ with /g/, a voiced velar plosive that is articulated further forward and more common in both Cirebonese and Indonesian.

According to interviews, students admitted to pronouncing *ghain* like /g/ because they sound similar to their ears. Some were unaware that *ghain* is not the same as the letter *gaf* in Latin transcription. They also indicated a lack of training on the tongue and throat positions required for producing this sound, reflecting limited phonetic competence, especially with non-native sounds.

Phonologically, replacing /ɣ/ with /g/ reflects a common phonetic adjustment among second-language learners. Since Cirebonese and Indonesian do not include voiced uvular fricatives, students default to the closest known sound—/g/. This process illustrates the naturalization of foreign phonemes based on articulatory familiarity.

The error highlights how difficulties in producing foreign sounds stem not only from articulatory limitations but also from inadequate exposure and instruction. If Arabic instruction, particularly in tajweed, does not explicitly train students to produce unique phonemes like /ɣ/, they will continue to make substitutions based on their phonetic perceptions—potentially altering the intended meanings in religious contexts. Pedagogical intervention is thus necessary, emphasizing systematic articulatory phonetics training. Early exposure to and practice in producing sounds like /ɣ/ is essential to help students go beyond mere visual memorization and internalize correct pronunciation.

3. إِنَّ

In the word إِنَّ, the glottal stop /ʔ/ (hamzah) at the beginning is often omitted by students. Phonetically, /ʔ/ is a glottal plosive produced by briefly closing the vocal cords before releasing airflow (Mustafawi, 2017). In Arabic, this sound is phonemic, meaning it can differentiate meaning. However, observation shows that nearly all students fail to produce the glottal onset, pronouncing the initial vowel without the required glottal closure.

Student interviews support these findings. Many reported unfamiliarity with producing glottal stops, describing the sound as "unnatural" or "awkward." They also noted that teachers rarely explain how to articulate hamzah or its importance. This points to gaps in phonetic pedagogy, particularly for sounds not present in students' native languages.

From a phonological perspective, this issue stems from the absence of /ʔ/ in Cirebonese and spoken Indonesian. Since the glottal stop is not systematically used or recognized as phonemic in these languages, students lack phonemic awareness of /ʔ/ and therefore omit it. This phenomenon is explained by negative language transfer, where features of the first language interfere with second language production. Without prior experience producing /ʔ/, students unconsciously exclude it from their Arabic pronunciation—even though it is crucial for semantic and phonological correctness.

Moreover, this omission extends beyond إِنَّ to words like أُمَّةٌ and وَاللهُ, indicating a systemic issue. The very low awareness of /ʔ/ highlights the potential for miscommunication and misreading of Qur'anic or formal Arabic text. Thus, targeted pedagogical approaches are needed, including articulatory awareness training. Teachers must actively teach and model glottal stop production, providing specific drills and stressing that hamzah is not merely a script marker but an integral part of Arabic phonology.

4. خَلَقَ

In the word خَلَقَ, the letter *kha* (/x/) should be pronounced as a voiceless uvular fricative, produced by air friction between the back of the tongue and the uvula without vocal cord vibration (Mustafawi, 2017). This sound is robust and harsh, a hallmark of Arabic phonology. However,

observations show that students consistently pronounce it as /h/, a voiceless glottal fricative formed much further forward in the glottis, resulting in a softer and gentler sound.

This is a clear case of articulatory substitution, where one sound is replaced by another produced in a more accessible part of the vocal tract. Interviews confirm this: most students perceive *kha* and *ha* as identical or consider *kha* simply a "thicker" version of *ha*, reflecting a fundamental misunderstanding of their distinct articulatory features. Within the framework of interlanguage phonology, this error illustrates how learners adapt foreign phonemic systems to their native inventories. Since /x/ does not exist in either Cirebonese or Indonesian, students substitute it with /h/, the acoustically closest available fricative.

The error also reflects low phonological literacy regarding Arabic letters that appear similar in writing but differ greatly in pronunciation. In Qur'anic recitation, this is critical: for instance, *khalaqa* (he created) versus *halaqa* (he shaved) bear completely different meanings. Therefore, improving students' pronunciation of *kha* requires a phonetics-based instructional approach. This should include visual demonstrations of tongue and throat positions, audio recordings for comparison, and targeted articulation drills to reinforce the correct production of /x/.

5. عَالِمٌ

In the word عَالِمٌ, the letter *ʿain* (/ʕ/) is a voiced pharyngeal consonant produced by constricting airflow in the pharynx while vibrating the vocal cords (Mustafawi, 2017). It is deep, heavy, and unique to Arabic phonology. However, observations show that students almost always omit this sound, pronouncing *ʕa:limun* as *a:limun*, with no trace of the pharyngeal consonant.

This omission suggests students are either unaware of /ʕ/ or unable to articulate it. Interviews reveal that most do not know how to pronounce *ʿain* and often skip it, believing it to be a silent or ornamental script element. From a linguistic standpoint, /ʕ/ is absent in both Cirebonese and Indonesian. This unfamiliarity creates substantial challenges in perception and production, especially in the absence of adequate phonetic instruction. Learners commonly omit or replace unfamiliar sounds with pauses or easier phonemes—in this case, deletion.

This issue also reflects perceptual assimilation: the tendency to interpret unfamiliar sounds through the lens of known phonemes. As /ʕ/ is outside the students' phonetic repertoire, they fail to perceive or produce it. The implications are significant: *ʿalim* (عَالِم, "scholar") becomes *alim*, potentially rendering the word ambiguous or meaningless. In Qur'anic recitation, omitting *ʿain* distorts meaning and undermines the sacredness of the text. Hence, addressing this issue requires a structured phonetic pedagogy emphasizing visual and kinesthetic techniques—using mirrors, native audio models, and step-by-step articulation drills—to help students develop both awareness and ability to produce /ʕ/.

6. طَيِّبٌ

In the word طَيِّبٌ, the letter *ṭa* (/ṭ/) is an emphatic voiced alveolar plosive, involving secondary articulation such as velarization (raising the tongue's back) (Mustafawi, 2017). It produces a heavy, deep sound distinct from the lighter /t/. However, field data shows that students consistently pronounce *ṭa* as /t/, lacking any emphatic quality. Consequently, *ṭayyibun* becomes *tayyibun*, with a loss of articulatory depth.

Interviews indicate that students do not recognize a distinction between *ṭa* and *ta*, often thinking the difference is merely orthographic. Most report never receiving explicit instruction or training in emphatic consonants. Phonologically, this is a substitution based on suprasegmental features, where an emphatic /ṭ/ is replaced by the non-emphatic /t/. Cirebonese and Indonesian lack emphatic consonants, leading students to perceive the two as identical. The absence of articulatory phonetic instruction compounds the problem.

This reflects negative transfer from the first language: when the L1 lacks certain phonemic contrasts, learners tend to ignore them in L2. Because emphatic consonants like /ṭ/, /ṣ/, and /ḍ/ are absent from the students' native phonologies, they fail to develop perception or articulation for these sounds. Such mispronunciations have important implications, particularly in semantics and religious practice. For example, *ṭayyib* (طَيِّب, "good" or "halal") differs entirely in meaning from *tayyib*—a nonstandard or incorrect form. Therefore, practical training in emphatic consonants is essential. This includes contrastive listening exercises, visualizations of tongue posture, and explicit, repeated

articulation practice. These methods can improve students' phonological awareness and pronunciation accuracy over time.

7. صَلَاةٌ (ṣalātun)

In the word *ṣalātun* (صَلَاةٌ), the letter ṣād (/ṣ/) is a voiceless alveolar fricative consonant characterized as emphatic, meaning it is produced with a retracted tongue root and increased tongue tension toward the rear of the oral cavity (Mustafawi, 2017). This articulation gives it a heavier and darker acoustic quality compared to its non-emphatic counterpart. In standard Arabic pronunciation, this phoneme is articulated with distinct emphasis, clearly distinguishing it from the plain /s/ sound.

However, in the observed pronunciation among students, the phoneme ṣād is consistently realized as /s/, lacking the emphatic tongue retraction or articulatory pressure. As a result, the word *ṣalātu* is pronounced as *salātu*. This phenomenon reflects a case of phonological substitution, where the emphatic consonant /ṣ/ is replaced by the non-emphatic /s/. This error stems from the students' lack of phonetic experience with emphatic consonants in their first languages—Cirebonese and Indonesian—both of which do not feature such phonemes. Interviews with students revealed that they were generally unaware of the phonetic distinction between ṣād and sīn, other than their differing written forms in the Arabic script. Some students even referred to both simply as "the letter S, but one looks bigger."

This error is systemic and indicative of a weak phonetic understanding of Arabic's unique sound inventory, which does not exist in the students' native phonological systems. Moreover, it reflects a lack of phonemic perception training, that is, the ability to hear and differentiate the heavier /ṣ/ from the lighter /s/. Without structured phonetic training, learners are likely to conflate these two sounds, since such distinctions are not salient in their everyday linguistic experiences.

From the perspective of interlanguage phonology, this substitution represents a simplification of the target language's phonological system by learners. Because the distinction of emphasis (emphaticness) does not lead to a difference in meaning in their L1, the students do not develop articulatory sensitivity toward emphatic sounds like /ṣ/. This supports the notion that pronouncing ṣād as /s/ is not merely a technical error but rather a result of the failure to integrate foreign phonemes into the learners' internal phonological system.

The implications of this mispronunciation are significant, especially within Islamic contexts, where the word *ṣalāh* (صَلَاة)—meaning the formal Islamic prayer—is fundamental. Mispronouncing it as *salāh* using /s/ instead of /ṣ/ may alter its phonological quality and, within the context of ritual worship, such inaccuracies in recitation are not trivial. This underscores that phonetic competence is not only a linguistic concern but also one with spiritual and ritual implications for the students in practicing Islamic teachings.

Therefore, phonetic instruction for the letter ṣād should explicitly emphasize the concrete differences between emphatic and non-emphatic sounds. Teachers may employ contrastive listening techniques, articulation exercises that promote tongue retraction toward the velum, and minimal pair drills (e.g., *ṣabr* vs. *sabr*) to develop students' phonemic awareness. With appropriate pedagogical approaches, students can be trained to distinguish and produce emphatic sounds such as /ṣ/ with greater accuracy.

CONCLUSION (Cambria 10 Capital Bold)

The conclusion should provide a concise yet comprehensive summary of the study by restating its primary aim and key findings in a paraphrased manner. Rather than repeating exact statements from previous sections, it should synthesize the main points to highlight the significance of the research. The conclusion should reinforce how the study contributes to the field, whether by confirming existing theories, introducing new perspectives, or filling identified research gaps. Additionally, it should reflect on the broader implications of the findings, emphasizing their relevance in academic and practical contexts. A well-structured conclusion ensures that readers leave with a clear understanding of the study's purpose and its key contributions.

Beyond summarizing the research, this section should also provide recommendations based on the study's findings. These recommendations may be directed toward future researchers,

policymakers, practitioners, or other stakeholders who can benefit from the insights gained. Suggestions for future research should address existing limitations, propose new areas of investigation, or suggest alternative methodologies that could further validate or expand upon the study's results. If the study has practical applications, recommendations should outline how its findings can be implemented in real-world scenarios. By offering thoughtful and constructive recommendations, this section ensures that the research remains relevant and serves as a foundation for further scholarly exploration and practical advancements.

This study has shown that the phonological interference of the Cirebon language significantly influences students' pronunciation of Hijaiyah letters, particularly in articulating Arabic phonemes that are absent in the Cirebonese and Indonesian sound systems. Systematic deviations—such as the substitution of /q/ with /k/, the omission of /ʔ/, the replacement of /x/ with /h/, and the neutralization of /ṣ/ into /s/—demonstrate consistent patterns of adaptation, simplification, and perceptual assimilation. These findings confirm that mispronunciations are not isolated performance errors but manifestations of deeper cross-linguistic phonological constraints.

By directly examining this underexplored contact between Arabic and the Cirebon language, the study fills a notable gap in the existing literature, which has primarily focused on Javanese or Madurese interference. It contributes new empirical evidence on how regional linguistic systems shape Arabic phonological acquisition within the socioreligious context of pesantren education. This linguistic perspective extends the discussion of Arabic phonology in multilingual Indonesia by highlighting the local phonetic realities faced by learners.

While pedagogical implications naturally emerge from these findings, their primary significance lies in advancing our understanding of interlanguage phonology and language contact phenomena. Recognizing the influence of local phonological structures on Arabic pronunciation not only refines theoretical models of second language sound acquisition but also provides a linguistic foundation upon which contextually appropriate teaching practices can be developed. Recommendations for future researchers include expanding the scope of analysis to compare Cirebonese interference with other regional languages in Indonesia, employing acoustic phonetic methods for more precise sound measurement, and exploring how sociolinguistic variables—such as exposure, language attitude, and Qur'anic literacy—interact with phonological transfer in Arabic learning contexts.

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