

PAPER NAME

**Arabic Language Implementation Viewed
from A Social and Cultural Perspective a
t Maitreechit Withayat**

AUTHOR

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WORD COUNT

5529 Words

CHARACTER COUNT

32298 Characters

PAGE COUNT

12 Pages

FILE SIZE

507.9KB

SUBMISSION DATE

Apr 22, 2024 9:53 AM GMT+7

REPORT DATE

Apr 22, 2024 9:53 AM GMT+7

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Arabic Language Implementation Viewed from A Social and Cultural Perspective at Maitreechit Withayattan School Bangkok

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Received: 2 September 2022

Reviewed: 13 January 2024 - 12 February 2024

Accepted: 23 February 2024

Published: 30 March 2024

Abstract

This research explores the implementation of Arabic language learning at the Maitreechit Withayattan School in Bangkok, Thailand. With a population dominated by a Muslim minority, this research aims to understand the challenges and potential for developing Arabic language education in this context. The research background reflects Thailand's uniqueness as an ASEAN country with a Muslim minority that is recognized and regulated by national law. The focus of the research is on issues of student interest, teaching methods, hidden learning goals, and the role of teachers in the learning process. The research method uses modern ethnographic studies at Maitreechit Wittaayathan School Bangkok. Research findings show that students' low interest is influenced by less innovative teaching methods and a need for more variety in learning. Hidden learning goals, which include students' political aspirations to support the position of

Muslims in government, become a complex dynamic in Arabic language learning. The importance of Arabic in the government context was a significant finding, with students being taught that Arabic language skills can provide a competitive advantage in careers in the government sector. Despite challenges regarding student interest, school administrators' high enthusiasm for Arabic creates the potential for solid collaboration between education and religious identity development. Implications for Arabic language education management include the need for more exciting learning strategies, teacher training, and collaboration with external parties to increase the relevance of learning to careers. This research provides in-depth insight into the complex dynamics of Arabic language education in Muslim minority school environments in Thailand. However, it should be acknowledged that the research findings are limited to one school in Bangkok, and generalization of the findings must be done cautiously.

Keywords: Arabic language; implementation; social and cultural perspective

Introduction

Thailand is one of the ASEAN countries with a minority Muslim population but has extraordinary attention to the existence of Islamic education for minority Muslims in Thailand. Islamic education is proven by a national education law in Thailand that also provides for legalizing Islamic education in Thai Islamic schools. Not only that but the Thai government's attention to the survival of minority Muslims is also demonstrated by its high level of tolerance towards adherents of the Islamic faith to carry out their da'wah and worship, as well as providing space for education observers to establish Islamic cultural centers and Islamic boarding school-based education (Isnaini, 2020). The Thai Muslim community's perception of the urgency of Arabic and English as foreign languages is very positive, so some Islamic schools in Thailand use these two languages as language of communication learning. Arabic and English are also included in the educational curriculum in Islamic schools in Thailand. (Shaputra, 2020; Zalnur & Rahman, 2023).

The southern region of Thailand has approximately 10% Muslim population and has the most significant percentage compared to other regions. Meanwhile, in Bangkok, which is the capital of Thailand, the Muslim population is still tiny. However, observing the traces of Islamic education, especially in learning Arabic in Bangkok, is also an attraction. Khlong Sam Wa is a district located in Bangkok, Thailand. Three community groups live in Khlong Sam Wa: Buddhists, Chinese, and Muslims (Syakhrani, 2022). Maitreechit Withayattan School is an Islamic school in Khlong Sam Wa, Bangkok, Thailand. As an Islamic education institution, the subjects taught are adapted to the Islamic education curriculum in Thailand, including fiqh, aqidah, morals, tafsir, the Koran, and Arabic.

Arabic is the language of the Koran and is often referred to as the language of the experts in heaven. So, to understand the Koran completely, a Muslim needs to master Arabic. The Thai Muslim community is highly aware of the importance of the role of the Arabic language in the propagation and development of Islam in Thailand. Therefore, as in Indonesian Islamic schools, the curriculum in Thai Islamic schools also requires students to master a foreign language, including Arabic. In learning Arabic, the aspects that need to be considered are learning objectives, learning materials, and the teacher's ability to teach, which has a significant role in the success of learning Arabic (Amar, 2023).

From the results of observations made, there were several identified problems related to learning Arabic, including: 1) students' interest in Arabic is still low; 2) the Arabic language learning method used is still monotonous in the form of lectures; 3) a learning model approach that is not collaborative and does not involve students; 4) the use of Arabic language learning media is

still minimal; 5) lack of support from school administrators for the development of Arabic in the school environment; 6) school culture is still dominated by Buddhist culture which places limits on student initiation and innovation; 7) There is still an opinion that learning a foreign language will reduce loyalty to your mother tongue.

Some of these problems inhibit the continuity of Arabic language learning and development at the Maitreechit Withayattan School. So many students still consider Arabic a challenging and uninteresting language to learn, even though it is one of the compulsory subjects. During COVID-19, the Arabic language learning approach encourages students to think critically, innovatively, and creatively by involving digital technology to strengthen communication skills so that teachers can also present technology-based learning media that can awaken students' reasoning power to obtain resources—more learning sources from the internet (Febriani, 2020). A research finding regarding the implementation of Arabic language learning also showed quite surprising results when it was stated that it could not be successful in Islamic educational institutions at the high school level. Several obstacles triggered this: students who need a basic knowledge of Arabic, limited study hours and learning facilities, and an environment that does not support students in getting used to speaking Arabic (Zurqoni et al., 2020). Arabic language ability is also influenced by the teacher's ability to carry out learning using appropriate media (Qureshi et al., 2022).

Socio-cultural differences between Arabic and Indonesian in expressions, terms, and naming objects also cause problems in learning Arabic, so it is not easy for people who are not native Arabic speakers to be able to understand the implied meaning easily and quickly (Amar, 2023). Even though the socio-cultural perspective is quite an essential aspect for students to make it easier to learn Arabic, there is not much research that discusses the implementation of Arabic language learning from a social and cultural perspective, primarily if it is related to the context of Arabic language learning in Thai Islamic schools. It is still solid in culture and social values referring to Buddhism.

Literature review

Social culture in Thailand

Thailand, a fascinating Southeast Asian country, presents a rich and diverse social scene. Involving elements of culture, history, and economic growth, social phenomena in Thailand reflect a society filled with color and deep values. One of the main pillars of Thailand's daily life is its cultural diversity and traditions (Mania, 2019). Magnificent traditional dances, stunning sculptures, and distinctive festivals such as Loy Krathong and Songkran demonstrate the rich cultural heritage passed down from generation to generation (Denes & Pradit, 2023; Homhuan & Sensai, 2024). Here, the strong influence of Buddhism created a moral foundation in society, translated into attitudes of humility, obedience to authority, and deep respect for others.

The tourism industry plays a central role in shaping Thailand's social dynamics. The interaction between residents and tourists creates a unique relationship, and in tourism areas, consumption patterns and lifestyles can change significantly (Niko & Atem, 2019). The marriage of traditional and modern creates an enchanting landscape amidst the hustle and bustle of a big city like Bangkok. Economic inequality is a sight to behold in Thailand. While big cities are experiencing a surge in economic growth, rural areas may face challenges. Traditional arts and performances paint the untold story of Thailand's cultural heritage. The graceful Khon dance, Ram Thai dramatization, and other performing arts are keepers of the flame of ancestral heritage that radiate the beauty and wisdom of art. Every movement, every note, is a fabric of history and life. This phenomenon creates a complex dynamic between urban development and rural sustainability.

Technology and innovation also shape Thailand's social landscape. Increased digital connectivity impacts the way people communicate and work. While this transformation brings benefits, it also raises questions about its impact on traditional values and lifestyles. Internal and international migration has become an important phenomenon that has shaped Thailand's social face. Migrant workers from neighboring countries bring new colors into the cultural landscape, creating unique harmony amidst diversity (Almanduri, 2021).

Political challenges and social demonstrations have given an extra dimension to socio-cultural phenomena in Thailand. Political conflict can show instability, but it also marks the participatory spirit of society in shaping the country's future. Although not entirely even, this progress shows a step towards a more inclusive society. Challenges related to climate change and the environment create awareness of the need for adaptation and environmental conservation. Thailand is responding with efforts to protect its stunning natural beauty.

Arabic in Thailand

Thailand, a country known for its natural beauty and cultural heritage, has embraced the charm of Arabic in its education system. This language education is a valuable addition to the formal curriculum and an engaging journey for students who seek to explore and understand the richness of Islamic culture. Competent teachers and experts in Arabic guide Thai students on their journey to understand one of the most beautiful languages in the world. This curriculum embraces a holistic learning philosophy, whether part of a regular subject or additional program.

Digging deeper into the essence of learning Arabic in Thailand, there is a balanced focus on four essential language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Zakiyah & Huda, 2020). These elements are integrated into learning to create a holistic learning environment. Variations in learning materials are a common sight in Arabic language classes. Textbooks, audio, video, and other print and digital resources provide powerful tools, sparking student creativity and actively building language skills.

The importance of understanding Arab culture also permeates learning not only about language but also about traditions, customs, daily life, and history. Each lesson is about vocabulary and grammar and embracing cultural diversity (Layyinah, 2019; Abduh et al, 2021). Evaluation and progress measurement systems provide direction for student monitoring. Written exams, conversations, and creative projects allow students to prove their deep understanding of Arabic.

Some schools offer Arabic language programs as part of the full-time curriculum, while others present them as extracurricular opportunities. In these two contexts, students can explore Arabic language and culture with a level of engagement appropriate to the student's interests and needs. Exchange programs and international opportunities complement students' learning experiences (Ramadhan & Muassomah, 2022). Interacting directly with native speakers opens the door to a deeper understanding of the Arabic language and culture.

Research method

This research focuses on implementing Arabic from a socio-cultural perspective at Maitreechit Withayattan School, Bangkok, with the main objectives of identifying factors that influence students' interest in learning Arabic, evaluating Arabic language learning methods, and investigating school administrators' support for this learning. The research subjects involved three Arabic language teachers in grades VII, VIII, and IX. In contrast, the research object focused on applying Arabic in the school, seen from the socio-cultural perspective of Thai society. Data collection methods include non-participatory observation of Arabic language learning patterns in

classes taught by teachers and unstructured interviews with school principals and Arabic teachers. The informants involved seven people, including three teachers, one student from each class, and the school principal. Documentation is also used to collect data related to the curriculum, Learning Implementation Plan, and school profile.

Researchers began collecting data by observing Arabic language learning activities in junior high school classes, then reducing the data by summarizing and focusing on important aspects. The data collected is related to the pattern of implementing Arabic language learning. Next, the data is presented through short descriptions or charts, focusing on Arabic language learning patterns seen from a socio-cultural perspective. The final stage in data analysis involves in-depth verification and corrections, if necessary, to ensure reliable conclusions. This research shows the researcher's commitment to comprehensively understanding Arabic language learning patterns at Maitreechit Withayattan School by utilizing a socio-cultural approach.

Results

This research was conducted at Maitreechit Wittayathan School Bangkok, a private educational institution and Educational Welfare charity under the office of the Private Education Commission. Taking place over 27 days, from 4 September to 30 September 2022, this research provides an in-depth overview of the implementation of Arabic language learning at the school. The research population involved the School Director, Arabic language teacher, and 30 students from classes VII, VIII, and IX, with a sample consisting of 3 students from each class.

Below is the representation of the informant related to the evaluation of Arabic learning.

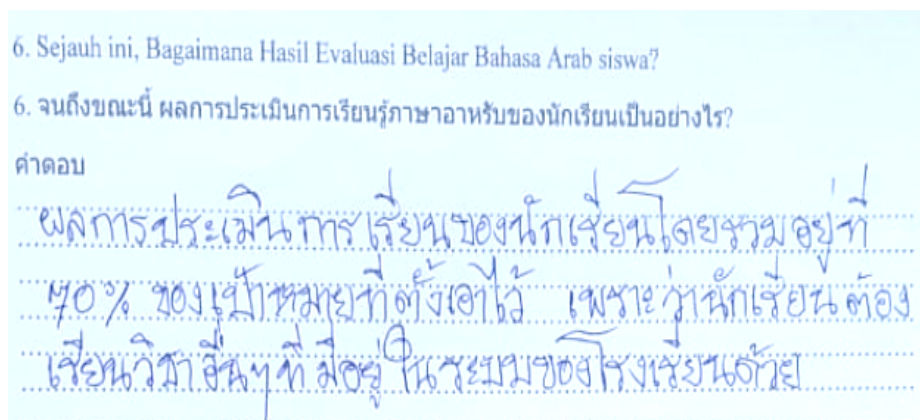


Figure 1. Evaluation in Arabic learning

"ผลการประเมินการเรียนรู้อาหรับของนักเรียนโดยรวมอยู่ที่ 70% ของเป้าหมายที่ตั้งเอาไว้ เพราะว่านักเรียนต้องเรียนวิชาอื่นๆ ที่มีอยู่ในระดมของโรงเรียนด้วย" the informant wrote "Overall student learning evaluation results reached 70% of the set target. This is because students also have to take Mandarin language subjects in the school curriculum."

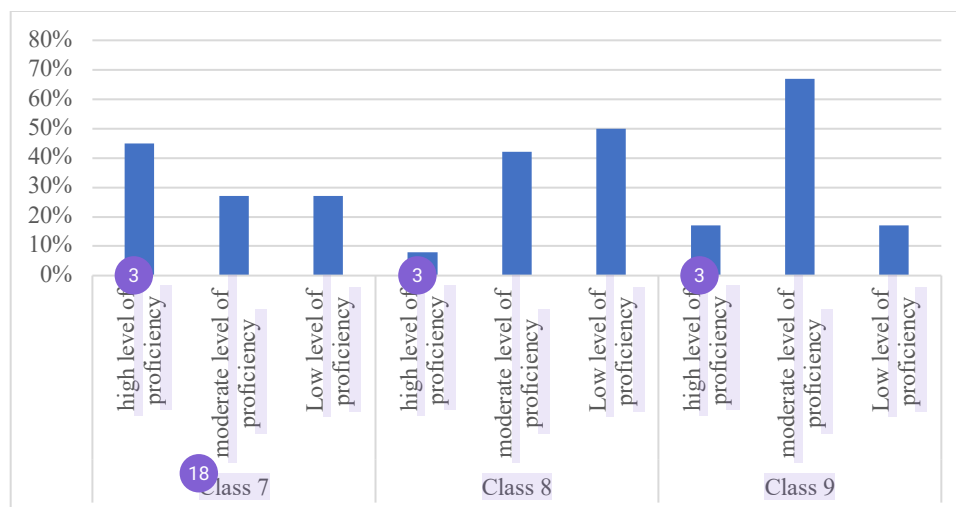


Figure 2. Arabic language learning proficiency level at Maitreechit Withayattan School

The figure 2. Describes that in implementing Arabic language learning at Maitreechit Withayattan School, approximately 45% of students in grade 7 achieved a high level of proficiency, while in grade 8, only 8% reached this level. At the grade 9 level, 17% of students achieved a high level of proficiency. Overall, about 23% of students attained a high level of achievement. Meanwhile, approximately 27% of grade 7 students, 42% of grade 8 students, and 67% of grade 9 students achieved a moderate level of proficiency. Regarding low achievement, around 27% of grade 7 students, 50% of grade 8 students, and 17% of grade 9 students reached this level. Although most students achieved satisfactory proficiency levels, special attention is needed for grade 8, which has a lower proportion of high achievement. Improvement efforts can be focused on enhancing teaching methods and providing additional support for students with low proficiency levels.

The observation and interview process began after the September 25, 2023 preliminary study. The research findings identified the main problem related to students' need for more interest in learning Arabic. Factors such as less attractive teaching methods and students' loyalty to their mother tongue are the main contributors. Apart from that, it was also revealed that there was a hidden learning objective, namely, so that students could become government employees and support the position of Muslims in the Thai government.

School administrators showed high enthusiasm for Arabic language learning during interactions with students and confirmation with interns. They emphasize the importance of Arabic language skills more than English, which is closely related to the da'wah mission and the development of Islam in the school environment. In addition, there is a strong desire to send their children to college in Muslim-majority Arab countries or Indonesia, seeing them as more ideal Islamic centers than Western countries.

The importance of Arabic here is seen not only as a means to understand the Islamic religion but also as a skill expected to support a career in the government sector. This reflects the complex dynamics between education, religion, and professional aspirations in the context of minority Muslim communities in Thailand.

The research results show that the role of the teacher as the primary source of learning is very dominant. Teaching methods that tend to be traditional, such as lectures and teacher centers, are prominent, while innovations in learning methods receive less attention. In addition, students'

lack of interest can be attributed to the lack of variety in teaching and the lack of use of exciting media.

The emergence of hidden objectives related to Islamic influence in government also creates a unique context. Students are not only taught Arabic to understand religion. However, they are also given the understanding that Arabic language skills can provide advantages in the world of work and support the role of Muslims in government.

In addition, the school management's enthusiasm for the Arabic language, which reflects the mission of preaching and developing Islam, shows how education at this school is not only about academic knowledge but also becomes an instrument for developing the identity and contribution of Muslims in society.

This research provides in-depth insight into the complex dynamics of Arabic language learning at the Maitreechit Withayattan School. Lack of interest from students and high loyalty to their mother tongue are significant challenges in implementing learning. The research shows that teaching strategies must be developed considering these aspects.

The hidden purpose of learning Arabic, namely to support the position of Muslims in the Thai government, highlights the complexity of the relationship between education, religion, and socio-political dynamics at the local level. This provides a basis for understanding the importance of Arabic not only as a religious skill but also as a tool for influence and role in society.

School administrators' enthusiasm for the Arabic language, especially in the context of Islamic da'wah and development, offers the potential for solid collaboration between education and religious identity development. The focus on teaching Arabic as a means of da'wah and developing Islamic values provides an additional dimension to the role of schools in shaping students' character and contributions.

Discussion

Arabic language empowerment at Maitreechit Wittayathan School

This research highlights the main challenge at Maitreechit Wittayathan School in Arabic language education, namely the need for more student interest in the language. The main challenge is caused by teaching methods that could be more innovative and exciting, mainly traditional approaches such as monotonous lectures, inhibiting student interaction and affecting their level of engagement. The lack of student interest in Arabic can be seen from the low student participation and response to learning. The students' participation is faced similarly but in Malaysia's Malay language context (Mahmud et al., 2018). Language learning increasingly faces challenges when it is studied as a second or even foreign language (Abidin & Fahmi, 2023; Desi, 2023; Handayani et al., 2022). Uninteresting teaching methods, primarily through lectures, create an environment where students are less enthusiastic about being actively involved in learning Arabic.

In addition, research finds that there is a hidden learning goal, where Arabic language education is aimed at understanding religion and creating Islamic cadres (Siddiq, 2018) who have substantial positions in the Thai government. This is reflected in political aspirations involving religious identity and the critical role of Islam in government structures.

Thus, Arabic language education at Maitreechit Wittayathan School needs help attracting students' interest. Less innovative teaching methods and hidden learning goals create complex dynamics between religious education, political aspirations, and religious identity. To overcome this challenge, a more exciting and diverse approach is needed in learning Arabic, as reflected in teaching methods (Lundeto, 2018), while understanding its essential role in forming Islamic cadres who can play a role in the Thai government.

Even though learning Arabic faces challenges, this research found that school administrators show high enthusiasm for developing this language. They place more value on Arabic language skills than English, which is linked to the mission of da'wah and the development of Islam in the school environment. The high enthusiasm of school administrators can be seen from the priority given to Arabic language learning. They consider the ability to speak Arabic as key to understanding and developing Islam, and this is reflected in their support for missionary missions. In addition, the desire to send children to college in Arab countries or Indonesia shows that school administrators have a global orientation in forming students' religious identities.

The high enthusiasm of school administrators for learning Arabic provides a positive view of efforts to develop this language in the school environment. This aligns with the direction of planning for 21st-century Arabic language learning, namely creating opportunities to strengthen the da'wah mission further and develop Islam among students (Setyawan, 2020a). By prioritizing Arabic language learning and a global orientation, schools can be essential agents in shaping students' religious identities and preparing them to contribute actively to the broader Muslim community.

Potential for collaboration and religious identity

The potential for collaboration and religious identity at Maitreechit Withayattan School creates a unique educational environment where learning Arabic is not only considered an academic aspect but also an integral part of developing students' religious identity. The school management's high enthusiasm for learning Arabic shows a solid commitment to the mission of preaching and developing Islam. In this context, Arabic language teaching focuses on understanding religious texts and incorporates Islamic values in every aspect of the curriculum (Setyawan, 2020b, 2020a).

The importance of collaboration between education and religious identity is seen in efforts to convey Arabic language knowledge and shape students' character. Religious identity is the basis for character formation, which includes values such as tolerance, justice, and empathy (Badi'ati, 2021) Through this approach, learning Arabic is about understanding vocabulary and grammar and internalizing religious values as part of forming a balanced and positive personality.

The potential for collaboration and religious identity is not only limited to the classroom but also significantly impacts students' societal roles. Students are empowered to bring religious values into everyday life and become agents of positive change in their communities (Widodo et al., 2022). In addition, awareness of students' role in society is also instilled, preparing them to contribute in social and political contexts.

More than that, the collaboration between education and religious identity at the Maitreechit Withayattan School aims to build character during the school year. It emphasizes the continuity of religious values outside the educational environment. Students are encouraged to maintain and develop their religious identity in their professional and social lives after they leave the school environment. Thus, the potential for this collaboration becomes the foundation for holistic education that prepares students to become individuals who contribute positively to society by their religious values.

The significance of Arabic in the government context

The importance of Arabic in the context of governance at Maitreechit Withayattan School creates a unique dimension in the Arabic language curriculum. This research reveals that learning Arabic at school is not only interpreted as an effort to understand the teachings of the Islamic

religion but also as a tool that can provide benefits in the world of government (Islam & Aziz, 2020). The hidden goal that emerged, namely for students to become government employees and support the position of Muslims in government, highlights the importance of Arabic language skills in achieving career aspirations in the government sector.

On a practical level, understanding Arabic is seen as a skill that can provide a competitive advantage. Students are taught that Arabic language skills can be an asset in supporting the role of Muslims in Thailand's government structure. This links Arabic language learning and students' preparation for active government involvement, creating a solid base for their contribution to society.

Moreover, these hidden aims created a complex context in which Arabic language learning was directed to fulfill religious needs and support specific ambitions and roles in government. Understanding the importance of Arabic as a tool to strengthen the position of Muslims in government reflects the complex dynamics between education, religion, and professional aspirations in the context of minority Muslim communities in Thailand.

The high enthusiasm of school administrators for Arabic language learning, which reflects the mission of preaching and developing Islam, confirms that this interest is not only practical but also has spiritual and ideological significance (Haniyah & Amrela, 2024). Learning Arabic here is not only about improving individual skills. However, it is also an integral part of a larger effort to strengthen Muslims' religious identity and contribution in government and society. Thus, the importance of Arabic in the context of governance at Maitreechit Withayattan School creates an important bridge between education, professional aspirations, and the development of students' religious identity.

Conclusion

This research explores the implementation of Arabic language learning at the Maitreechit Withayattan School in Bangkok, Thailand, with a focus on various aspects such as student interests, teaching methods, hidden learning goals, the role of teachers, and the importance of Arabic in the government context. In this context, the research aims to understand the challenges faced and potential developments that can be implemented, as well as their relationship to religious identity and learning goals that might motivate students.

Students' low interest in learning Arabic is one of the significant findings, influenced by less innovative teaching approaches and a lack of variety in learning methods. Hidden learning goals also emerged, including political aspirations to ensure students supported the position of Muslims in the Thai government. The role of the teacher seems very dominant, but teaching methods that are traditional and less innovative can be a factor that influences student involvement.

The high enthusiasm of school administrators for Arabic highlights the importance of this language in the context of governance and Islamic development. This creates opportunities to strengthen the mission of da'wah and the development of Islam among students. However, challenges related to student interest and teaching methods that do not support student engagement require special attention.

The management implications of Arabic language education include the need for more interesting and innovative learning strategies to increase student interest. There is also a need for training and professional development for teachers to improve teaching skills and integrate more modern learning methods. Collaboration with government institutions or organizations can also strengthen the relevance of learning Arabic about careers.

Although the research findings provide valuable insights, it must be acknowledged that this research is limited to one school in Bangkok, so generalization of the findings must be done with caution. External factors and the complexity of social and political conditions that can influence Arabic language learning have also yet to be fully explored. Limited research time can hinder collection of broader and more in-depth data. Therefore, caution is needed in interpreting and applying the findings of this study to a broader context.

1 Declaration of conflicting interest

The author declares with all confidence that this article has no conflict of interest or tendencies that subjectively influence the research results.

Funding acknowledgements

14 The author would like to express the deepest gratitude to the Chancellor of Universitas Djuanda, Prof. Dr. H. Martin Roestamy, S.H., M.H. who has provided financial funding for publishing this research work. Thanks are also expressed to Universitas Djuanda, which has provided the opportunity for researcher to complete the research.

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