

PHILOSOPHICAL AND PEDAGOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF LANGUAGE IMMERSION IN THE PESANTREN EDUCATIONAL TRADITION

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Abstract

This study analyzes the language immersion system of Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor with four interrelated aims: to examine its philosophical foundations, to describe its pedagogical architecture, to identify the features that distinguish it from Western immersion models, and to assess the challenges of its implementation. Using a qualitative library research approach, the study draws upon primary data from published scholarly works on Gontor's language system as well as relevant journal articles, theoretical frameworks, and institutional documents. Three sets of findings emerge. First, the system rests on a distinct epistemological belief that language serves as a vehicle for intellectual, moral, and spiritual formation, encapsulated in the institutional motto *al-lughatu tāju al-ma'hadi* (language is the crown of the institution). Second, pedagogically, the system operates through a 24-hour total immersion model that integrates the direct method (*aṭ-ṭarīqah al-mubāsyirah*), structured daily language programs, a peer-driven cadre system managed by the student organization (OPPM), and a linguistically rich school-scape. Third, the model fulfills the eight characteristics of immersion education proposed by Johnson and Swain and constitutes a distinctive non-Western variant of dual language immersion that integrates religious motivation with communal living, yet it also faces recurring challenges, including diglossia, fossilization, and the emergence of *'āmmiyyah Gontoriyyah* as an internal language variety. This research contributes to the theoretical discourse on language immersion by demonstrating that immersion programs can thrive within faith-based boarding institutions without reliance on native speakers, offering valuable lessons for Arabic language education across Islamic educational contexts.

Keywords

Bilingual Education; Direct Method; Gontor; Language Immersion; Pesantren.



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INTRODUCTION

As the oldest form of Islamic educational institution in Indonesia, the pesantren has long carried a dual mission: cultivating a generation that possesses deep religious understanding while equipping them with competencies essential for contemporary life. One of the most distinctive features of the modern pesantren tradition is its sustained commitment to foreign language mastery, particularly Arabic and English. In an era of globalization that increasingly demands multilingual proficiency, modern pesantrens such as Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor have operated a comprehensive language immersion system for nearly a century since its founding in 1926 (Zarkasyi, A.H. et al., 2026). This system transforms Arabic and English from mere school subjects into the living languages of daily life, employed around the clock within the boarding school environment.

The concept of language immersion has occupied a prominent place in applied linguistics since the pioneering experiment at St. Lambert, Quebec, Canada, in 1965, where French was used as the medium of instruction for English-speaking students (Genesee, 1987). The remarkable success of that program inspired numerous countries to adopt similar models. Subsequent research across a range of settings has refined our understanding of how immersion fosters bilingual development (Cummins, 2000; Lindholm-Leary, 2012). Curtain defined language immersion as a second language teaching method in which the target language serves as the medium of instruction across all learning activities (Curtain, 1986). Johnson and Swain (1997) subsequently formulated eight core characteristics of immersion programs that have since become the international benchmark, including the use of the second language as the medium of instruction, a curriculum parallel to non-immersion programs, sustained support for the first language, and an orientation toward additive bilingualism.

Within the Indonesian context, the most consistent and large-scale application of language immersion has, paradoxically, taken place within the modern pesantren setting long before the term "language immersion" gained currency in Western academic discourse. Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor, for instance, has elevated language to the highest institutional value, as expressed in its foundational motto: *al-lughatu tājū al-ma'hadī*, meaning "language is the crown of the pesantren" (Nur et al., 2026). This motto is far more than a rhetorical slogan; it constitutes a philosophical foundation affirming that language mastery represents both the identity and the dignity of the pesantren and serves as the primary instrument for the formation of the complete human being (*insān kāmil*).

Despite the century-long history of language immersion practices in pesantrens, scholarly inquiry examining these practices from both philosophical and pedagogical perspectives remains limited. The majority of existing studies tend to be descriptively practical in nature, documenting the technical implementation of language programs without excavating the epistemological roots and philosophical foundations that underpin them. Novitasari and Chojimah analyzed (2026) immersion-based learning at Gontor from the perspective of language skills development. Rahmah and Hadi examined English immersion at modern pesantrens through the communities of practice framework (Rahmah & Hadi, 2025). Karimah et. all. investigated the Arabic language learning curriculum at Gontor (Karimah et al., 2024) mapped the linguistic landscape of the Gontor complex, showing how monolingual target-language signage sustains an immersive environment, while Amalia et al. (2024) examined the management of Gontor's Arabic language program and documented student speaking competence at good to excellent levels. Nevertheless, a comprehensive analysis that integrates the philosophical and pedagogical dimensions within a unified analytical framework remains notably absent from the literature.

This lacuna poses a significant scholarly problem. Without an adequate philosophical understanding, language immersion practices in pesantrens risk being perceived merely as pedagogical techniques devoid of deeper meaning. Yet, as Humboldt asserted, language is the "organ of thought formation" (*das bildende Organ des Gedankens*) that embodies the worldview (Weltansicht) of a speech community (Von Humboldt, 1999). It should be stressed that frameworks such as Humboldt's are external analytical lenses adopted in the present study to interpret Gontor's practice; they are not part of the institution's own doctrinal vocabulary, which articulates its convictions chiefly through the motto *al-lughatu tāju al-ma'hadi* and the pedagogical maxims of its founders. Viewed through this lens, the linguistic system of the pesantren represents a manifestation of a profound epistemological conviction regarding the role of language in character formation and spiritual development.

Moreover, many immersion theories developed in the Western literature rest on contextual assumptions that often diverge from the pesantren reality. Many immersion programs in Canada and the United States operate within a day-school framework, with language exposure confined largely to the classroom, whereas pesantrens offer total immersion within a 24-hour boarding environment. Many dual language immersion (DLI) programs also rely on professional teachers and native speakers, while Gontor operates a peer-driven cadre system without the presence of native

speakers of the target language (Nur et al., 2026). These fundamental differences necessitate a scholarly examination that positions pesantren practices within a critical dialogue with contemporary immersion theory.

Against this backdrop, this article pursues three objectives: (1) to analyze the philosophical foundations of language immersion in the pesantren tradition, with particular reference to Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor; (2) to describe the pedagogical architecture of the immersion system and the characteristics that define the model; and (3) to place the Gontor model in dialogue with established immersion theory, identifying its distinctive features, the challenges it confronts, and its implications for the development of Arabic language education in Indonesia. In doing so, the study seeks to enrich language immersion theory with a non-Western, faith-based perspective and to offer practical guidance for pesantren and madrasah educators in designing meaningful language programs.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a library research (literature study) design. According to Creswell (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), a qualitative approach is appropriate when researchers seek to understand phenomena in depth through interpretive analysis of textual data. The library research design was selected because the research objectives are analytical-interpretive in nature namely, examining the philosophical foundations and pedagogical architecture of language immersion in the pesantren tradition which necessitates the synthesis of multiple written sources.

The data of this study consist of textual information on seven dimensions of the Gontor language system: the philosophy of language, the direct method of instruction, the immersive linguistic environment, the structured language programs, the peer-driven cadre system, the linguistic competency outcomes, and the challenges of implementation. The primary source of these data is a comprehensive scholarly work by Nur et.al (Nur et al., 2026), together with institutional documents that directly record the Gontor language system. This primary source covers the description of the linguistic system, the theoretical framework of immersion, the alignment between theory and practice, effectiveness evaluation, determinant factors, challenges, and implications. Secondary data sources include relevant peer-reviewed journal articles retrieved from databases such as Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and accredited national journal portals, with a focus on recent

publications (2015–2026) addressing language immersion, Arabic language education, bilingualism in pesantrens, and second language acquisition theory. Supporting sources also comprise empirical studies of language immersion and Arabic language education, together with the theoretical literature on immersion, bilingualism, second language acquisition, and language policy, including the frameworks of Krashen (1982), Swain (1993), Cummins (2000), Lave (1999), and Johnson and Swain (1997) which serve as the analytical lenses for this study.

Data collection was conducted through documentation, involving the systematic recording and organization of data from written sources. The reading-and-noting technique was applied to both primary and secondary sources, encompassing the identification of key concepts, the recording of direct and indirect quotations, and the mapping of inter-conceptual relationships.

Data analysis employed content analysis and thematic analysis techniques, proceeding through four stages: (1) identification, locating and marking data units pertaining to philosophical foundations, pedagogical architecture, effectiveness, and the distinctiveness of the immersion model; (2) classification, grouping data into principal themes based on the research questions; (3) interpretation, assigning meaning to the data using the established theoretical frameworks; and (4) synthesis, integrating the findings into a coherent analytical narrative. Data trustworthiness was maintained through source triangulation, that is, cross-checking data from the primary book against findings from independent empirical studies conducted by other researchers on related topics.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Philosophical Foundations of Language Immersion in the Pesantren Tradition

Analysis of the data sources reveals that language immersion in modern pesantrens, particularly at Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor, rests on a philosophical foundation that differs fundamentally from Western models, not merely in technical implementation but in its ontological and epistemological roots concerning the nature of language and its role in human education.

In the Western intellectual tradition, the philosophy underpinning language immersion has generally rested on cognitive and economic considerations. A second language is acquired for the sake of academic advantage, global competitiveness, and neurocognitive benefits such as enhanced executive control and cognitive flexibility (Bialystok, 2017). This rationality is reflected in the motivations of the parents in St. Lambert, Quebec, who in 1965 advocated for the establishment of a

French immersion program out of concern regarding the quality of conventional language instruction and a desire for their children to possess bilingual competence as a vehicle for socioeconomic mobility (Genesee, 1987).

In contrast to this rationality, Gontor situates language within a broader philosophical framework that integrates intellectual, moral, and spiritual dimensions. Nur document that the motto *al-lugatu tāju al-ma'hadi* ("language is the crown of the pesantren") is not merely an institutional slogan but rather an epistemological declaration affirming that language occupies the highest rank in the pesantren's hierarchy of values. Language is not simply a tool for communication; it is an instrument for the holistic formation of the human being (*insān kāmil*), encompassing intellectual acuity, moral maturity, and spiritual depth (Nur et al., 2026).

This philosophical foundation can be traced further to Humboldt's conception of language as the "organ of thought formation" (*das bildende Organ des Gedankens*) that embodies the worldview (*Weltansicht*) of a speech community (Von Humboldt, 1999). In Humboldt's perspective, mastering a language is not merely the acquisition of a technical skill but also the opening of a new intellectual horizon and the shaping of one's perception of reality. Gontor operationalizes this principle by positioning Arabic as the gateway to the Islamic intellectual heritage contained in the Qur'an, Hadith, and classical texts (*turāts*), while English serves as the window to modern knowledge and global communication (A. S. Zarkasyi, 2005).

The spiritual dimension provides an additional philosophical layer absent from Western immersion models. The belief that learning Arabic constitutes an act of devotion because it serves as the medium for comprehending divine revelation renders the motivation for learning inherently transcendental. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2009) distinguish three components in the L2 Motivational Self System framework: the ideal L2 self, the ought-to L2 self, and the L2 learning experience. Among Gontor's students, the ideal L2 self is not merely shaped by images of professionals proficient in foreign languages, but also by the aspiration to become scholars capable of reading classical Islamic texts, community leaders who can communicate in international forums, and preachers who deliver cross-cultural religious messages (Nur et al., 2026). This religious-spiritual motivation functions as a driving force that transcends both the integrative and instrumental motivations identified in Gardner and Lambert's (1972) classical taxonomy.

To realize the philosophical status accorded to language, Gontor has constructed a language policy architecture built upon three dimensions that Spolsky (2004) identifies as the core components

of language policy: language beliefs, language practices, and language management. These three dimensions do not stand in isolation but rather function as a mutually reinforcing ecosystem that conditions every resident of the pesantren to live through the target languages at all times.

Table 1. Institutional Foundations of Language in the Gontor Immersion System

No.	Institutional Principle / Datum	Function of Language in the Gontor System	Source
1	Motto: <i>al-lughatu tājū al-ma'hadi</i>	Establishes language as the identity and highest value of the institution	Nur et al. (2026); Zarkasyi (2005)
2	Arabic (<i>al-'arabiyyah al-fuṣḥā</i>)	Serves as the gateway to the Qur'an, Hadith, and the classical Islamic heritage (<i>turāts</i>)	Zarkasyi (2005) Nur et al. (2026)
3	English	Serves as the window to modern knowledge and international communication	Zarkasyi (2005); Nur et al. (2026)
4	Holistic human formation (<i>insān kāmil</i>)	Positions language mastery as an instrument for intellectual, moral, and spiritual formation	Nur et al. (2026)
5	Religious-spiritual motivation	Frames Arabic learning as an act of devotion, giving it a transcendental orientation	Dörnyei & Ushioda (2009)
6	Language-policy architecture (beliefs, practices, management)	Sustains a mutually reinforcing ecosystem that governs language use throughout pesantren life	Spolsky (2004)

Source: Compiled by the authors from Nur et al. (2026), Zarkasyi (2005), and Spolsky (2004).

Pedagogical Architecture of the Language Immersion System in the Pesantren

An examination of the pedagogical architecture of Gontor's language immersion system reveals a model that is structured, holistic, and integrated into every aspect of pesantren life. This model operates through four principal pillars that mutually reinforce one another. The first pillar is the direct method of instruction (*aṭ-ṭarīqah al-mubāsyrāh*). On the academic track, all teaching within the Kulliyatul Mu'allimin al-Islamiyyah (KMI) is conducted using the direct method, which prohibits the use of the mother tongue as a mediating language and requires teachers to employ the target language exclusively in the classroom (Syamsu, 2018). The pedagogical maxim *aṭ-ṭarīqatu*

ahammu mina al-māddati ("the method of instruction is more important than the subject matter") underscores that how knowledge is delivered is as important as indeed more important than the content of the knowledge itself. This principle aligns with Krashen's input hypothesis (Krashen, 1982), which posits that language acquisition occurs when learners comprehend input slightly beyond their current competence level ($i+1$), and the direct method serves as one of the most effective mechanisms for providing comprehensible input on a massive and sustained basis. Earlier empirical work on the application of the direct method in pesantren settings has demonstrated its effectiveness in enhancing students' oral proficiency by fostering active engagement and eliminating reliance on the mother tongue as a mediating language (Nur & Rini, 2017).

The second pillar is the input-rich environment, encompassing the linguistic landscape (school-scape) and designated language zones. Rohmah et al. (2024), in their study of the linguistic landscape at the Darussalam Gontor complex, found that the pesantren environment functions as a "linguistic battlefield" a space of linguistic contestation in which every visual element is dominated by the target languages. Monolingual foreign-language signage predominates in the visual landscape, compelling students to comprehend messages, instructions, and values without the mediation of Indonesian. This finding carries significant theoretical weight: within a sociolinguistic framework of symbolic power, the visual dominance of the target language constitutes an expression of symbolic power that positions foreign languages as legitimate linguistic capital in the pesantren's internal language market (Muttaqin et al., 2024).

The third pillar comprises structured language programs spanning daily, weekly, monthly, and annual activities. Nur et.al (2026) document these programs in detail, designed to develop the four language skills (*mahārāt al-lughah*) in a balanced manner. At the daily level, activities include: (a) *ta'lim al-mufradāt*, or daily vocabulary instruction each morning after the dawn prayer, averaging three new words per day and yielding an accumulation of approximately 576 vocabulary items per year; (b) *muḥāḍaṣah*, or structured conversation practice that trains speaking skills (*mahārat al-kalām*); and (c) *darsul masā'*, or afternoon lessons that enrich language experience beyond the KMI classroom hours. At the weekly level, Friday Morning Events and *muḥāḍarah* (trilingual speech practice) provide students with opportunities to develop public speaking skills. On a periodic basis, *insyā' usbū'i* (periodic essay writing) serves as the primary vehicle for developing writing skills (*mahārat al-kitābah*). The incorporation of creative language games (*al-al'āb al-lughawiyyah*) within these structured programs has also been shown to enrich the learning experience and sustain student

motivation across the four language skills (Nur, 2021).

The fourth pillar is the institutional architecture that undergirds the entire system. Language management at Gontor involves two complementary tracks: the academic track, administered by the KMI, which encompasses the standardization of teaching methods and evaluation through oral and written examinations; and the non-academic track, administered by the Student Affairs Division with the OPPM (Organisasi Pelajar Pondok Modern, or the Student Organization) as the implementing body. On the non-academic track, the OPPM operates a peer-driven cadre system in which senior students serve as language mentors for their juniors (Nur et al., 2026). The language enforcement mechanism through the *mahkamah lughawiyah* (language court) serves as an instrument of assessment and corrective action for students who violate the official language use regulations.

This entire pedagogical architecture operates within a 24 hour integration framework that mandates the use of the target languages not only in the classroom but across every dimension of pesantren life the dormitories, dining hall, sports fields, and all social interactions. This integration transforms the pesantren into a "sociolinguistic laboratory" in which every sensory experience of the students carries educational value for language development (Nur et al., 2026).

Table 2. Alignment of the Gontor Language System with Johnson and Swain's (1997) Eight Characteristics of Immersion

No	Immersion Characteristic (Johnson & Swain)	Implementation at Gontor
1	L2 as the language of instruction	Arabic and English as the medium of instruction in KMI and dormitory life
2	Curriculum parallel with non-immersion programs	KMI curriculum aligned with the national curriculum plus Islamic studies content
3	Support for the first language (L1)	Indonesian continues to be used in certain contexts; not eliminated
4	Orientation toward additive bilingualism	Target mastery of Arabic-English without sacrificing Indonesian proficiency
5	L2 exposure primarily in a controlled environment	24-hour exposure across all areas of the pesantren, extending beyond the classroom
6	Initial L2 proficiency relatively equal among participants	New students are generally beginners in both Arabic and English
7	Teachers possess bilingual competence	KMI teachers and Gontor alumni instructors with bilingual competence
8	Classroom culture reflects the L1 community	Pesantren culture becomes an authentic linguistic ecosystem

Source: Compiled from Zarkasyi, A. H. et al. (2026) and Johnson & Swain (1997)

Table 3. The Four Pedagogical Pillars of the Gontor Immersion System

No	Pillar	Form of Implementation	Implementing Body	Time / Frequency
1	Direct method (<i>aṭ-ṭarīqah al-mubāsyirah</i>)	Exclusive use of the target language, with no recourse to the mother tongue as mediator	KMI teachers	Formal classroom instruction (daily)
2	Input-rich environment (school-scape and language zones)	Monolingual target-language signage and designated language zones that create total immersion	Institution and OPPM	Continuous (24 hours)
3	Structured language programs	<i>ta'līm al-mufradāt, muḥādaṣah, darsul masā', muḥāḍarah, and insyā' usbū'i</i> , developing the four language skills	KMI and OPPM	Daily, weekly, and periodic
4	Institutional architecture	Academic track (KMI) and non-academic track (OPPM cadre system), with enforcement through the mahkamah lughawiyah	KMI and the Student Affairs Division (OPPM)	Ongoing management

Source: Compiled by the authors from Zarkasyi, A. H. et al., (2026).

Table 4. Synthesis of Empirical Evidence on the Effectiveness of the Gontor Immersion Model

No	Study	Design / Object	Skill or Aspect	Reported Finding	Evidence Type
1	Novitasari & Chojimah (2026)	Qualitative study of immersion-based learning	Listening (<i>istimā'</i>)	Listening competence acquired naturally through consistent target-language exposure	Independent empirical study
2	Amalia et al. (2024)	Management (POAC) analysis of the Arabic program	Speaking; program management	Integrated management functions yield speaking competence at good-to-excellent levels	Independent empirical study
3	Oktaviana (2022)	Analysis using Skinner's verbal-	Speaking (<i>kalām</i>)	Direct method fosters echoic, mand, tact, and	Independent empirical study

		4behavior framework		intraverbal behavior	
4	Zarkasyi, A. H. et al. (2026) Cummins (2000)	Documentation of the fathul kutub program	Reading (<i>qirā'ah</i>)	Reading of classical texts indicates CALP-level proficiency	Primary-source report and author inference
5	Rahmah & Hadi (2025)	Community-of-practice study	Writing (<i>kitābah</i>)	Production-correction-revision cycle yields gradual improvement in writing	Independent empirical study
6	Karimah et al. (2024)	Curriculum analysis	Curriculum institutional	/ Needs-based design, cross-subject integration, and continuous assessment support effectiveness	Independent empirical study
7	Lateh et al. (2025)	Synthesis of Gontor best practices in Thailand	Cross-context transferability	Successful adaptation abroad offers preliminary evidence of transferability	Independent empirical study (limited)

Source: Compiled by the authors from the studies cited in the table.

The theoretical alignment outlined above requires confirmation through empirical evidence of students' linguistic competency outcomes. Table 4 synthesizes the independent studies consulted, indicating the type and strength of support behind each finding, and together they point to a competency profile that is relatively balanced across the four language skills (*mahārāt al-lughah*).

Across the four skills the evidence converges. Listening competence develops through continuous target-language exposure, which within Krashen's input framework supplies the comprehensible input on which the remaining skills rest. Speaking is supported by integrated program management and the direct method, whose effects are evident in echoics, manding, tacting, and intraverbal behavior. Reading attainment is evidenced by the fathul kutub program, in which fifth- and sixth-year students read and analyze classical Arabic texts independently, thereby indicating the level of Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), which Cummins regards as the highest indicator of second-language mastery. Writing develops through *insyā' usbū'ī*, where the production-correction-revision cycle of the pesantren's community of practice yields gradual

improvement, consistent with Swain's Output Hypothesis, which holds that output compels learners to notice the gap between intention and expression. At the curricular and institutional levels, needs-based curriculum design, cross-subject language integration, continuous assessment, and the consistent application of the direct method reinforce these outcomes, while the model's adaptation in Thailand offers preliminary evidence of its transferability.

Challenges and Limitations of the Pesantren Immersion Program

An honest appraisal of the effectiveness of any educational program must extend beyond an inventory of its achievements. The data analysis reveals five structural challenges confronting the pesantren immersion model. The first challenge is Arabic diglossia. Ferguson (1959) characterized diglossia as the coexistence of a high variety (High/*fuṣḥā*) and a low variety (Low/'*āmmiyyah*) within a single speech community. Gontor consistently teaches *al-'arabiyyah al-fuṣḥā* as its official language, an ideological choice rooted in the conviction that *fuṣḥā* is the language of the Qur'an and the repository of Islamic scholarly heritage. However, this choice creates a competence gap: students who are fluent in *fuṣḥā* may encounter communicative difficulties when interacting with Arabic speakers in the Middle East who employ local '*āmmiyyah* varieties in daily life (Zarkasyi, A.H. et al., 2026).

The second challenge is psycholinguistic in nature, pertaining to the concept of fossilization as developed by Selinker and Rutherford (2013). Fossilization refers to the phenomenon in which language patterns that do not fully conform to target-language norms become entrenched in the learner's competence and prove resistant to further correction. In the Gontor context, fossilization may occur in certain grammatical patterns, pronunciation features, or lexical usages that recur in daily communication without receiving consistent corrective feedback. Han (2003) argued that fossilization does not necessarily signify failure; it may also be regarded as a stabilization stage that permits sufficiently efficient communication despite incomplete grammatical accuracy.

The third challenge is the emergence of an internal language variety known as '*āmmiyyah Gontoriyyah* a distinctive Gontor Arabic variety that has evolved through inter-student interaction and does not fully adhere to standard grammatical norms. On the one hand, this phenomenon indicates that Arabic has genuinely become a living, everyday language and a marker of the collective identity of the Gontor community. On the other hand, this variety may become a source of concern when it is expected to serve as a productive standard for cross-contextual communication. Tarone (1979) demonstrated that this phenomenon is, in fact, universal within immersion settings:

every immersion community tends to develop its own internal language variety.

The fourth challenge is inter-individual variation in language attainment. Although Gontor's system is designed to provide equal exposure and practice opportunities for all students, individual achievement varies significantly. Goebel (2007) explained this variation through the framework of individual differences in second language acquisition (SLA), which encompasses factors such as language aptitude, motivation, personality, and learning styles that interact in complex ways.

The fifth challenge is sociopolitical, relating to the global hegemony of English as a lingua franca: students may perceive English as instrumentally more "useful" than Arabic. The religious-spiritual motivation attached to Arabic serves as a buffer against this pressure and maintains the balance between the two target languages.

Effectiveness and Distinctiveness of the Pesantren Immersion Model: A Comparative Analysis

A comparative analysis of Western immersion models reveals fundamental differences that are not merely contextual variations but rather touch on the foundational assumptions about how language immersion ought to be organized. The first difference lies in the number of target languages. Western immersion models typically focus on a single second language, whereas Gontor operates simultaneous immersion in two foreign languages Arabic and English through a weekly rotation system (*usbū' 'arabī and usbū' injilīzī*). The simultaneous operation of immersion in two foreign languages demands greater cognitive flexibility, as students must manage two new language systems in alternation (Bialystok, 2009). This arrangement positions Gontor more closely within the category of dual language immersion (DLI), albeit with the distinctive feature that both target languages are foreign to all learners rather than the majority-minority language combination typical of DLI programs in the United States (Lindholm-Leary, 2012).

The second difference concerns the scope and social structure of learning. Western immersion models generally operate within the classroom in a day-school framework, thereby limiting target language exposure to school hours. Gontor, as a boarding school, unifies formal classroom instruction with dormitory life, ensuring that target-language exposure extends throughout the full 24-hour day. If students are awake for an average of sixteen hours per day and 90-95 percent of their exposure involves the target language, then within a single academic year, a student receives more than 4,000 hours of auditory exposure far exceeding the time allocation of any Western immersion program (Zarkasyi, A. H. et al., 2026). This intensity surpasses the threshold that Cummins (2000) considered sufficient for the development of Cognitive Academic Language

Proficiency (CALP).

The third difference relates to the sociolinguistic status of the target language. In French immersion programs in Canada, the target language is a living language within the surrounding community, and the school benefits from natural exposure in the external environment. At Gontor, Arabic is not the language of the surrounding community; it must be entirely created and sustained by the institution through deliberate policies, programs, and rigorous enforcement mechanisms. From the perspective of language socialization theory, Gontor is a compelling case: the institution has constructed an artificial yet functional and sustainable speech community without ecological support from the surrounding society.

The fourth difference is philosophical in nature, as discussed in the preceding sections. The rationale for immersion in the West is generally cognitive-economic, whereas at Gontor it is epistemological-spiritual. Language mastery is perceived as a pathway toward understanding divine revelation and cultivating holistic character formation, rather than merely securing a competitive advantage in the global labor market.

The fifth difference lies in the mechanism that drives the system. In Western immersion models, the responsibility for delivering target language input rests primarily with professional teachers and native speakers. At Gontor, the peer-driven cadre system positions senior students as the primary agents of language enforcement and instruction. This peer-driven model offers advantages in terms of sustainability and cost-efficiency, yet it also introduces the risk of intergenerational language quality erosion (Zarkasyi, A.H., et al., 2026). Gontor mitigates this risk through a multilayered quality control mechanism that includes supervision by senior teachers (*taftīsy fuḡā'ī*), the *iṣlāḥ al-lughah* (language correction) program, and the standardization of methods through the *at-tarbiyah al-'amaliyyah* manual.

Table 5. Comparison of the Western Language Immersion Model and the Gontor Model

No	Aspect of Comparison	Western Immersion Model	Gontor Model
1	Number of target languages	One second language	Two foreign languages (Arabic & English)
2	Duration of exposure	School hours (6–8 hours)	Full 24 hours (boarding school)
3	Native speakers	Available teachers/models	as Not available; peer-driven system
4	Primary motivation	Cognitive-economic	Religious-spiritual and instrumental
5	Scope	Classroom (day school)	Entire dormitory life
6	Target language status	Living language in the	Created and

		surrounding community	maintained by the institution
7	Driving mechanism	Professional teachers	Peer-driven cadre system (OPPM)
8	Philosophical foundation	Pragmatic-functional	Epistemological-spiritual

Source: Compiled from Zarkasyi, A.H. et al. (2026), Genesee (1987), and Lindholm-Leary (2012)

Taken together, the findings reported above constitute four interrelated aspects of a single system: the philosophical foundation supplies the rationale, the pedagogical architecture operationalizes it, the resulting configuration distinguishes the model from Western immersion programs, and the challenges mark the limits within which the system operates. Table 6 summarizes these four aspects together with the principal evidence supporting each.

Table 6. Synthesis of the Four Interrelated Aspects of Language Immersion
at Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor

No	Aspect	Core Finding	Key Evidence / Framework
1	Philosophical foundation	Language is positioned as the crown of the institution (<i>al-lughatu tāju al-ma'hadi</i>) and as an instrument for the holistic formation of the human being (<i>insān kāmil</i>); the driving motivation is religious-spiritual rather than cognitive-economic.	Nur et al. (2026); Zarkasyi (2005); Spolsky (2004)
2	Pedagogical architecture	Four mutually reinforcing pillars: the direct method, an input-rich school-scape, structured daily to annual language programs, and dual-track institutional management (KMI and OPPM) operating within a 24-hour total immersion.	Zarkasyi, A. H. et al. (2026); Krashen (1982); Rohmah et al. (2024)
3	Distinctive characteristics relative to Western models	Two simultaneous foreign target languages, 24-hour boarding exposure, absence of native speakers, a peer-driven cadre system, and a speech community created and sustained by the institution itself.	Johnson & Swain (1997); Genesee (1987); Lindholm-Leary (2012)
4	Implementation challenges	Diglossia between <i>fuṣḥā</i> and <i>'āmmiyyah</i> , fossilization, the internal variety <i>'āmmiyyah</i> Gontoriyyah, inter-individual variation in attainment, and the global hegemony of English.	Ferguson (1959); Selinker & Rutherford (2013); Tarone (1979); Goebel (2007)

Source: Compiled by the authors from the findings presented in Tables 1–5.

Discussion

The findings presented above warrant discussion through critical dialogue with prior research to clarify the study's contribution. In interpreting them, we distinguish throughout among evidence drawn from independent empirical studies, claims reported in the documentary and theoretical literature, and inferences advanced by the present authors, so that the strength of support for each claim remains transparent.

First, with regard to the philosophical foundations, the findings of this study reinforce (Freire, 2021) argument that genuine education cannot be separated from the dimensions of liberation and the formation of critical consciousness. At Gontor, language is not merely a technical instrument of communication but rather a medium of intellectual emancipation that enables students to access the Islamic scholarly heritage directly without the intermediary of translation. This perspective also aligns with (van Lier, 2004) ecological view, which conceives of language learning as a process that emerges from the dynamic interaction between learners and their environment, rather than the mere absorption of isolated input.

Second, the findings concerning Gontor's pedagogical architecture corroborate the results of (Novitasari & Chojimah, 2026), who found that a controlled immersion environment produces significant improvements in students' listening and speaking skills. Amalia et al. (2024), in their examination of the Arabic language program management at Gontor, similarly found that the four management functions (Planning, Organizing, Actuating, Controlling) operate in an integrated manner, producing student speaking competence at good to excellent levels. These findings are further substantiated by Oktaviana (2022), who, employing Skinner's verbal behavior theoretical framework, demonstrated that the direct method at Gontor effectively facilitates Arabic language acquisition at the levels of echoic, mand, tact, and intraverbal behavior.

Third, the alignment of Gontor's system with Johnson and Swain's (1997) eight characteristics of immersion, as presented in Table 2, provide theoretical legitimacy for a practice that has operated for nearly a century. This finding is consistent with the conclusions of Rahmah and Hadi (2025), who found that modern pesantrens with active language practices fulfill the criteria of communities of practice within Lave and Wenger (1999) framework, wherein new students learn through legitimate peripheral participation before progressing toward full membership in the speech community.

Fourth, the comparative analysis with Western immersion models yields a significant theoretical conclusion: Gontor constitutes a non-Western variant of dual language immersion that

enriches the global landscape of bilingual immersion models. Recognition of this variant is important because the DLI literature has hitherto been dominated by studies from North American and European contexts (Lindholm-Leary, 2012). Consequently, much of the DLI theoretical framework reflects assumptions common in those contexts such as day schooling, the availability of native speakers, and cognitive-economic motivation and has not yet accommodated variants rooted in faith-based boarding educational traditions. The findings of Lateh et al. (2025) regarding the adaptation of the Gontor model in Thailand, provides preliminary evidence that this model possesses cross-contextual transferability.

Fifth, the identification of challenges confronting the Gontor model Arabic diglossia as formulated by Ferguson (1959), fossilization within Selinker and Rutherford's (2013) framework, and the formation of the internal variety *'āmmiyyah Gontoriyyah* demonstrates that the effectiveness of immersion programs is never absolute. These challenges are, in essence, universal within immersion contexts: Tarone (1979) demonstrated that every immersion community tends to develop its own internal variety. Han (2003) maintained that fossilization does not necessarily signify failure; rather, it may be viewed as a stabilization stage that permits sufficiently efficient communication despite incomplete grammatical accuracy. Addressing such persistent difficulties for non-native learners requires deliberate instructional strategies that target the specific linguistic obstacles learners encounter (Almelhes, 2024). Nonetheless, awareness of these challenges is essential to ensure that the program does not become complacent and continues to pursue renewal. Viewed through a more social and interactional lens (Firth & Wagner, 1997), such an internal variety need not be regarded solely as deviation; perspectives on translanguaging García and Otheguy (2020) suggest that it may also function as a resourceful adaptation within a bilingual community, provided that learners retain access to the standard variety.

Sixth, from a motivational perspective, these findings enrich the taxonomy of second-language learning motivation. While Gardner and Lambert (1972) distinguished between integrative and instrumental motivation, and Dörnyei and Ushioda (2009) developed the L2 Motivational Self System, the Gontor case reveals a religious-spiritual motivational dimension that has not been adequately accommodated within mainstream theoretical frameworks. This motivation is not merely a variant of instrumental motivation; it possesses a qualitatively distinct driving force rooted in transcendental convictions regarding the relationship among language, knowledge, and faith. This dimension resonates with broader work on the affective and identity bases of language learning

classroom motivation (Ryan & Dörnyei, 2015), learner investment and identity, and willingness to communicate, while extending that work by foregrounding a transcendental orientation that those frameworks do not fully capture.

CONCLUSION

This library-based study concludes that language immersion in the modern pesantren tradition rests on a distinctive epistemological foundation in which language is treated not merely as a means of communication but as an instrument for the holistic formation of the human being, an orientation that differs from the largely cognitive-economic rationale of Western immersion programs; that the Gontor model operates pedagogically as a total, 24-hour dual-language immersion architecture built on four pillars, namely the direct method, an input-rich environment, structured language programs, and integrative institutional mechanisms, and sustains this environment without relying on native speakers; that the model is consistent with Johnson and Swain's eight characteristics of immersion and thus constitutes a non-Western, faith-based variant of dual language immersion in which religious motivation functions as the driving force; and that this configuration also gives rise to specific challenges, namely diglossia, the risk of fossilization, the emergence of the internal variety *‘āmmiyyah Gontoriyyah*, inter-individual variation in attainment, and the competing pull of English. Because these conclusions derive from documentary and secondary sources, they remain interpretive rather than causal, and longitudinal and experimental research is needed to test the model's effectiveness and transferability.

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