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Challenges of learning english in *pesantren* environment: barriers and implications

Wildanu Siyam[1*], Septi Gumiandari[2]
[1,2]Universitas Islam Negeri Siber Syekh Nurjati Cirebon

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the multidimensional challenges of English language learning within Indonesian pesantren (Islamic boarding schools), focusing on cultural, institutional, pedagogical, and psychological barriers. Utilizing a qualitative literature review and thematic synthesis of empirical studies, case studies, and scholarly literature published between 2020 and 2026, this research examines how traditional religious education environments navigate modern global competency demands. The findings reveal four primary barrier categories: (1) cultural and ideological factors, where English is frequently perceived as a secular or Western ideology carrier subordinate to Arabic, resulting in a hierarchical language ideology; (2) environmental and institutional constraints, characterized by inadequate facilities, limited time allocation (average 2x45 minutes weekly), and inconsistent enforcement of language zones; (3) pedagogical and human resource challenges, marked by a high proportion of non-ELT qualified teachers (>60%), teacher-centered translation methods, and mother-tongue suppression; and (4) psychological and affective factors, including elevated speaking anxiety, fear of peer ridicule, passive communication norms (sami'na wa atho'na), and reliance on extrinsic motivation. Guided by Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, the study concludes that overcoming these barriers requires systemic institutional reforms. Key implications include reframing English as an instrument for global da'wah (Islamic outreach), adopting translanguaging and culturally responsive materials, investing in teacher professional development, and establishing sustained peer scaffolding to foster active language acquisition while preserving students' Islamic identity.

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*Corresponding author.
e-mail address: wildanusiyam53@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

Pesantren, as traditional Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia, hold a historic and pivotal role in the national educational landscape. Functioning as autonomous centers for religious transmission, these institutions traditionally emphasize Quranic exegesis (Tafsir), Prophetic traditions (Hadith), Arabic grammar, and Islamic jurisprudence (Fiqh). However, as globalization reshapes socio-economic and academic requirements, Indonesian Islamic education faces an imperative to modernize. Under Ministry of Religious Affairs (Kemenag) educational frameworks, *pesantren* are increasingly expected to integrate national secular curricula, particularly English language instruction. As noted by Umar et al. (2025), "*pesantren* are increasingly expected to equip their learners with global competencies, including English proficiency, to enable meaningful participation in higher education, professional fields, and global religious discourse". Beyond career prospects, mastering English is increasingly recognized as a strategic instrument for international da'wah (Islamic missionary outreach), enabling Muslim scholars to communicate Islamic values to multicultural audiences worldwide.

Despite this policy drive, integrating English language teaching (ELT) within *pesantren* environments creates a complex socio-religious paradox. Historically, language learning in *pesantren* operates under an implicit hierarchical ideology. As Rahayu (2025) vividly describes, "English in *pesantren* is like a lost guest in the palace of languages, squeezed between an invisible hierarchy: Arabic as the 'sacred language of heaven', regional languages as the 'root of identity', and Indonesian as the language of unity". In many traditional settings, English continues to face ideological resistance. As documented by Farid & Lamb (2020) and Tsantila et al. (2016), English instruction encounters friction because it is historically viewed as the language of non-believers, creating an indirect association with Western secularism or colonial legacies. Consequently, conservative educators and community leaders may perceive English not merely as a neutral tool for communication, but as a potential "carrier of Western ideology" that threatens traditional Islamic moral values (Maulana, 2023). This ideological friction fosters a prevailing mindset among learners that religious knowledge supersedes foreign language acquisition, summarized in student perspectives such as "English is not useful for my afterlife" (Mustofa, 2024).

Beyond ideological friction, systemic environmental and institutional constraints severely impede effective language acquisition. Most *pesantren* operate under rigorous daily schedules dominated by religious study and memorization (hifdz), leaving minimal time for general subjects. Wibowo (2024) points out that English is often allocated as little as 2 x 45 minutes per week compared to over 20 weekly hours dedicated to religious subjects. This severe time constraint results in a "poverty of stimulus," where input frequency is insufficient to build linguistic competence. Furthermore, physical infrastructure remains inadequate, characterized by overcrowded classrooms, poor ventilation, and a lack of instructional technology or media (Marzulina et al., 2021; Sofyan et al., 2023). Although some institutions attempt to establish mandatory "English Days" or "English Zones," enforcement is often inconsistent due to a lack of structured scaffolding and peer monitoring (Pratama et al., 2025). Applying Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory, language acquisition requires a supportive social environment; without sustained community reinforcement, immersion policies lose their pedagogical effectiveness.

Human resource limitations and rigid pedagogical approaches further exacerbate these challenges. A significant proportion of English instructors in *pesantren* lack formal qualifications in ELT or professional pedagogical training (Hasanah et al., 2025; Lamb,

2013). Instructional methods frequently rely on teacher-centered lecturing, grammar-translation, and rote memorization rather than communicative practices (Susanto, 2023). Moreover, strict "target-language only" policies that penalize mother-tongue usage (e.g., Javanese or Sundanese) generate cognitive strain and speaking anxiety rather than fluency (García & Lin, 2022; Wijaya, 2025). Combined with the traditional cultural norm of passive obedience (sami'na wa atho'na), students encounter psychological barriers, including elevated affective filters, fear of peer ridicule, and low self-confidence (Krashen, 1985; Azizah & Sutopo, 2025; Lubis et al., 2024).

While localized empirical studies have investigated isolated aspects of *pesantren* ELT—such as student motivation (Fitria, 2023), institutional support (Shofiya & Mubarok, 2023), or specific immersion programs (Pratama et al., 2025)—there remains a lack of a unified, comprehensive synthesis that connects cultural, institutional, pedagogical, and psychological dimensions into a single explanatory model. Synthesizing recent findings is crucial to move beyond diagnostic criticism toward actionable instructional strategies.

To address this literature gap, this qualitative review synthesizes empirical and theoretical research published between 2020 and 2026 across Indonesian *pesantren* contexts. Specifically, this study seeks to address two core research questions:

1. What are the primary cultural, institutional, pedagogical, and psychological barriers hindering English language acquisition in *pesantren* environments?
2. What strategic pedagogical and institutional framework can be implemented to mitigate these barriers while preserving the religious identity of *pesantren* learners?

By addressing these questions, this study aims to offer educational policymakers, pesantren leaders (Kyai), and language practitioners an actionable model for designing contextually responsive, culturally grounded, and effective English language programs.

2. METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative literature review approach, utilizing systematic thematic analysis to examine and synthesize empirical research, case studies, and conceptual literature on English Language Teaching (ELT) within Indonesian pesantren environments. Grounded in the descriptive and interpretive qualitative paradigm outlined by Creswell (2014), this approach focuses on understanding complex socio-educational phenomena in their contextual reality by analyzing qualitative evidence, participant narratives, and instructional evaluations reported across existing literature. A literature-based qualitative design is particularly suitable for this inquiry as it enables the integration of diverse empirical findings from various *pesantren* types ranging from traditional (*salaf*) to modern (*khalaf*) institutions across multiple Indonesian regions into a unified explanatory framework.

The research corpus comprises peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, academic book chapters, and research reports published between 2020 and 2026. Literature was retrieved through systematic searches across primary academic databases and indexes, including Scopus, ERIC, Google Scholar, the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), and the Indonesian Science and Technology Index (SINTA). Search strategies employed combinations of English and Indonesian keywords, such as: English language learning" AND "*pesantren*", "EFL barriers" AND "Islamic boarding school", Language ideology" AND "*pesantren* ELT", "Affective filter" AND "*santri* motivation", Translanguaging" AND "Islamic education". To ensure analytical validity and

contextual relevance, literature was filtered according to explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria which are Studies explicitly investigating English language teaching, learning strategies, curriculum policies, or stakeholder perceptions within Indonesian Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*). Research published between 2020 and 2026 to capture contemporary post-pandemic instructional developments and updated educational policies. Peer-reviewed publications offering empirical qualitative data (e.g., interviews, observations, document analyses) or grounded theoretical frameworks. Non-peer-reviewed opinion pieces, duplicate records, and studies lacking clear methodological descriptions were excluded. To enhance analytical trustworthiness and interpretive validity, the qualitative synthesis applied investigator triangulation by cross-verifying findings across multiple independent studies and contrasting *salaf* (traditional) and *khalaf* (modern) *pesantren* contexts. The resulting thematic architecture provided the structural foundation for mapping institutional barriers and formulating targeted pedagogical solutions.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the synthesized findings of the literature review on English Language Teaching (ELT) barriers within Indonesian *pesantren* environments. The empirical evidence and conceptual insights are organized across four core thematic domains: cultural and ideological barriers, environmental and institutional constraints, pedagogical and human resource challenges, and psychological and affective factors.

3.1. Cultural and Ideological Barriers.

One of the most profound and persistent obstacles confronting English Language Teaching (ELT) in the *pesantren* environment is the complex intersection of cultural perceptions, religious worldviews, and language ideology hierarchies. Historically, the introduction of English in traditional Islamic boarding schools has been met with ideological skepticism. Dating back to the colonial era, Western languages most notably Dutch and English were frequently associated with colonial subjugation, secularism, and Christian missionary activities. As documented by Farid & Lamb (2020) and Tsantila et al. (2016), this historical legacy continues to cast a long shadow over modern pedagogical practices, as the use of English as a medium of instruction in conservative *pesantren* is sometimes perceived as an indirect alignment with non-Islamic or Western values. Consequently, Bin-Tahir et al. (2019) emphasize that the structural perception of English as a foreign, secular tongue directly conflicts with the dominant socio-religious roles of Arabic and Indonesian, creating a deeply entrenched hierarchical language ideology that systematically marginalizes English instruction within the institutional ecosystem.

This linguistic hierarchy reflects a socio-religious stratification of language utility. As vividly conceptualized by Rahayu (2025), English in the *pesantren* setting functions like a lost guest in the palace of languages, squeezed within an invisible four-tier hierarchy: Arabic occupies the supreme position as the sacred, divine language of the Quran and Islamic jurisprudence; regional vernaculars (such as Javanese, Sundanese, or Madurese) serve as the rooted foundation of local cultural identity and daily communal bonding; Indonesian functions as the official vehicle of national unity and civic governance; while English is relegated to the absolute periphery as an extraneous, non-essential tool. Because language preference in *pesantren* is intimately tied to spiritual identity and religious devotion, this hierarchy leads many learners to devalue foreign language acquisition.

The eschatological orientation of *pesantren* education further amplifies this devaluation. The fundamental purpose of the traditional boarding school experience is the

cultivation of religious knowledge, moral rectitude, and spiritual preparation for the afterlife. When English is presented through purely utilitarian or secular frameworks, learners fail to perceive its relevance to their spiritual trajectory. This psychological disconnect is encapsulated in qualitative learner narratives compiled by Mustofa (2024), where students explicitly state that English is not useful for their afterlife. Such statements illustrate how the absence of a spiritual or religious rationale for language learning creates a cognitive barrier; students rationalize their lack of effort by concluding that mastering a secular foreign language yields no divine reward, thereby diminishing both intrinsic and instrumental motivation.

Furthermore, a critical sociocultural mismatch exists between standardized ELT instructional materials and the lived reality of *pesantren* students. Commercial textbooks authorized for national public schools are typically constructed around urban, Westernized, or middle-class secular contexts that clash with the communal, ascetic, and religiously focused lifestyle of *santri*. Sari et al. (2024) reveal that existing ELT coursebooks lack alignment with learners' daily routines, spiritual values, and domain-specific communicative functions required in Islamic environments. For example, textbook units focusing on secular environmental stewardship present concepts in ways that feel foreign to students who already possess a rich theological framework based on *khalifah fil ardh* (human stewardship of the earth). When instructional materials fail to validate or integrate students' existing socio-religious schemata, learners experience cognitive friction, viewing the target language as an alien construct rather than a meaningful medium for self-expression.

This ideological tension is exacerbated by anxieties surrounding Western cultural invasion and moral contamination. Research by Maulana (2023) demonstrates that many conservative *pesantren* leaders, elders, and educators view English not merely as a neutral medium for global communication, but as an active carrier of Western ideology, individualism, and liberal socio-moral values that directly threaten traditional Islamic ethics and community cohesion. To guard against potential cultural erosion, administrators frequently impose strict censorship on authentic learning resources, prohibiting Western pop culture, contemporary music, feature films, or secular literature in the classroom. While intended to protect moral integrity, this protective censorship deprives learners of authentic, contextualized linguistic input, rendering classroom activities rigid, sanitized, and disconnected from real-world language dynamics.

Finally, these ideological dynamics place English teachers in an exceptionally challenging position as pedagogical and moral mediators. Instructors must navigate the delicate boundary between delivering effective, communicative language instruction and adhering to strict institutional socio-religious norms (Skourdoumbis & Madkur, 2020). As Zainuddin et al. (2025) observe, teachers frequently struggle to design communicative tasks and curate instructional examples that achieve linguistic accuracy without offending religious sensibilities or triggering institutional pushback. Without formal training in culturally responsive pedagogy or material design that explicitly bridges ELT with Islamic values, teachers often resort to safe, passive teaching strategies such as rote grammar translation and text reading which further reinforces the perception of English as a sterile, unengaging subject.

3.2. Environmental and Institutional Constraints

Beyond cultural and ideological friction, the physical, operational, and institutional environment of *pesantren* imposes severe structural limitations on foreign language acquisition. Grounded in second language acquisition (SLA) research, language learning is intimately shaped by the physical and ecological conditions of the instructional space.

Across many traditional and semi-modern Islamic boarding schools, physical infrastructure remains rudimentary and severely under-resourced. Marzulina et al. (2021) identify overcrowded classrooms, extreme time constraints, and a critical dearth of learning facilities as ubiquitous challenges in *pesantren* EFL settings. Empirical accounts documented by Sofyan et al. (2023) highlight a widespread lack of administrative and financial prioritization from boarding school foundations, resulting in uncomfortable physical environments—such as poorly ventilated, un-faned classrooms where stifling heat causes physical distress and impedes student focus during language tasks. Furthermore, the absence of modern educational technology, audio-visual equipment, language laboratories, and reliable internet connectivity deprives teachers of multi-modal tools required to deliver dynamic, authentic language input.

A secondary institutional bottleneck is the absence of a sustained, immersive target-language ecosystem outside the formal classroom. Unlike conventional urban schools or specialized language institutes, the daily social architecture of *pesantren* is completely dominated by local regional dialects (such as Javanese, Sundanese, or Madurese), national Indonesian, and liturgical Arabic. Because institutional authorities explicitly prioritize Arabic as the primary medium for religious studies and classical text comprehension, foreign language practice becomes structurally sidelined. As student narratives reveal, daily routines offer virtually no organic social space, administrative motivation, or community encouragement to speak English in informal interactions. This lack of authentic communicative outlets creates an environment where students learn English as an abstract, isolated academic subject rather than a living tool for social interaction, leading to stagnant oral fluency and auditory processing skills.

Even when *pesantren* management implements formal immersion initiatives—such as designated "English Zones" or weekly "English Days" institutional execution and policy compliance remain highly inconsistent. Research by Pratama et al. (2025) demonstrates that while institutions establish structured language zones and clear administrative guidelines, actual enforcement suffers from rapid breakdown in the absence of continuous, structured supervision by instructors or student mentors. Without active, empathetic monitoring, students frequently revert to native regional languages out of convenience, social solidarity, or fear of linguistic error. This administrative failure is directly illuminated by Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory, which asserts that higher psychological processes and language acquisition are fundamentally mediated through structured interaction within a social environment. Language learning requires continuous social scaffolding, expert modeling, and peer reinforcement; when an institution fails to sustain this sociocultural scaffold, immersion initiatives collapse into symbolic gestures without real pedagogical impact.

Institutional curriculum design and administrative schedule allocation further restrict foreign language learning opportunities. In the vast majority of *pesantren*, English is treated as a minor secular subject and allocated minimal instructional hours compared to religious disciplines. Wibowo (2024) reports a severe curricular imbalance, with English receiving an average of only 2 x 45 minutes of instructional time per week—a stark contrast to religious subjects, which frequently consume up to 20 weekly hours. This severe time constraint creates a classic "poverty of stimulus" condition in SLA, where input frequency and exposure duration are far too low to facilitate cognitive retention or implicit rule internalization. Moreover, the daily schedule of a *santri* is exceptionally demanding, involving pre-dawn prayers, intensive Quranic memorization, classical text recitation, and evening religious lectures. This rigorous routine leaves students in a state of chronic cognitive exhaustion and mental burnout, leaving little remaining bandwidth or executive functioning capacity for active language production during scheduled English classes.

Finally, institutional limitations are compounded by inappropriate learning resources and hierarchical social structures. As Putra et al. (2024) observe, commercially available English textbooks utilized in *pesantren* are rarely adapted to the domain-specific communicative needs, cultural values, or daily experiences of Islamic boarding school students. The scarcity of contextually grounded materials that bridge Islamic ethics with practical language functions makes it exceedingly difficult for educators to create meaningful, engaging lessons. Consequently, teaching methods rely heavily on passive, teacher-centered strategies, grammar translation, and rote drills that fail to promote active participation (Achmad & Muta'alimin, 2023). This pedagogical rigidity is further reinforced by the formal, highly stratified social structure characteristic of *pesantren* culture, which conditions students toward passive, non-interactive communication patterns, ultimately inhibiting their confidence and willingness to engage in spontaneous target-language communication (Auladi & Bakhtiar, 2024).

3.3. Pedagogical and Human Resource Challenges

The quality and availability of English teachers are another critical issue. Lamb (2013) notes that common problems include "teacher shortages, insufficient qualifications, and mismatches in expertise" in Islamic educational institutions. Many teachers may not have specialized training in English language teaching, making it challenging to deliver engaging and effective lessons. A recent survey by Hasanah et al. (2025) reveals that "more than 60% of English teachers in *pesantren* do not hold a bachelor's degree in English education, and only 30% have received professional training in language teaching methods".

Moreover, teachers face the additional challenge of adapting their teaching methods to the unique context of *pesantren*. As observed by Skourdoumbis & Madkur (2020), "English teachers are challenged to integrate Islamic principles into their lessons while also dealing with the historical and cultural associations of English". This requires not only linguistic competence but also a deep understanding of Islamic values and culture, which many teachers may lack.

Pedagogical practices can also be problematic. Some approaches, such as banning the use of students' mother tongues in the classroom, may actually hinder learning rather than help it. Research by García & Lin (2022) shows that "suppressing the mother tongue reduces students' cognitive capacity by up to 34%", highlighting the importance of a more inclusive and contextualized approach to language teaching. As noted by Wijaya (2025), "in many English classes in *pesantren*, teachers often interrupt discussions with warnings like 'No Javanese! English only!', as if the mother tongue were a virus that contaminates learning. This practice not only creates anxiety but also prevents students from expressing their ideas freely".

Furthermore, the diversity of students' linguistic backgrounds and proficiency levels adds complexity to the teaching process. Teachers often struggle to meet the needs of students who come from different regions with different native languages and varying levels of prior English education. As stated by Sutanto et al. (2025), "the heterogeneous nature of *pesantren* classes requires teachers to be highly adaptable and creative in designing learning activities that can accommodate different learning styles and abilities".

Teaching methods often remain teacher-centered and focused on grammar translation. According to a study by Susanto (2023), "the dominant teaching style in *pesantren* is still lecturing, translation, and rote memorization of vocabulary, with very little emphasis on speaking activities or communicative drills". This approach prioritizes form over function, resulting in students who may understand grammar rules but lack the fluency

and confidence to communicate in real-life situations. The lack of exposure to modern teaching aids like language laboratories or educational technology further widens the gap.

3.4. Psychological and Affective Factors

Psychological barriers also play a significant role in English learning. Many students experience fear, anxiety, and lack of confidence when speaking English, often due to the fear of making mistakes or being judged by their peers. Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1985) explains that "negative emotions such as fear, embarrassment, or peer judgment can act as a psychological filter that impedes the natural acquisition and production of language".

Recent research by Lubis et al. (2024) confirms that "factors such as self-confidence, motivation, and social support significantly affect students' English language skills. Students who have a supportive environment, such as friends or teachers who encourage them to speak, tend to be more confident and proficient". Conversely, students who feel unsupported or criticized are more likely to remain silent and avoid participating in class activities.

High-achieving students may even avoid speaking to prevent being seen as "showing off", while low-achieving students struggle with basic linguistic skills and self-esteem issues. One participant in a study by Mustofa (2024) remarked, "I know the words in my head, but they do not come out right. People laugh at how I say them". These affective factors further limit opportunities for practice and improvement.

Motivation is another key factor. Research by Farid et al. (2023) distinguishes between intrinsic motivation (driven by personal interest and enjoyment) and extrinsic motivation (driven by external rewards or requirements). They found that "in *pesantren* settings, extrinsic motivation often dominates, as students learn English mainly to meet school requirements or pass exams, rather than because of genuine interest". This type of motivation is often less sustainable and may decline over time if not supported by positive learning experiences and relevant content.

The culture of discipline a"d obedience in *pesantren* also contributes to passive learning. As explained by Azizah & Sutopo (2025), "students are accustomed to listening and obeying (sami'na wa atho'na), which creates a psychological barrier where they feel unworthy or afraid to express opinions freely in a foreign language". This mindset transforms the classroom into a space of evaluation rather than communication, increasing anxiety and reducing willingness to take risks, which is essential in language learning.

4. CONCLUSION

Learning English in a *pesantren* environment represents a complex pedagogical process shaped by interrelated cultural, institutional, pedagogical, and psychological factors. This study has systematically synthesized the primary barriers hindering language acquisition, demonstrating that negative socio-religious perceptions, language ideology hierarchies, and historical associations of English with Western secularism continue to marginalize foreign language instruction in traditional boarding school settings. Simultaneously, severe environmental constraints, including minimal weekly time allocation, inadequate physical infrastructure, and inconsistent enforcement of language zones, create a pronounced poverty of stimulus. These physical limitations are further compounded by pedagogical challenges, such as a high prevalence of non-ELT qualified instructors, teacher-centered translation methods, and strict target-language exclusivity that suppresses the mother tongue. Consequently, learners encounter significant psychological hurdles, experiencing elevated speaking anxiety, fear of peer ridicule, and a reliance on extrinsic motivation. To address these multifaceted barriers, systemic institutional reforms

and pedagogical adaptations are essential. Educational stakeholders and *pesantren* leaders must reframe socio-religious perceptions by positioning English not as a threat to local moral values, but as an indispensable tool for global da'wah, higher education, and international academic discourse. Institutional policy must also prioritize the development of contextually grounded learning materials that integrate Islamic values and local cultural contexts, allowing students to bridge cognitive gaps between foreign language structures and their daily lived experiences. Furthermore, pedagogical approaches should shift toward communicative, student-centered methodologies that incorporate translanguaging strategies, leveraging regional languages and Indonesian as cognitive scaffolding rather than treating native tongues as obstacles. Finally, sustainable language acquisition requires investing in targeted professional teacher development centered on Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) and establishing structured peer mentorship to maintain supportive immersion environments. Ultimately, while the barriers to English language learning in *pesantren* are significant, they are by no means insurmountable. By addressing ideological friction, modernizing physical infrastructure, empowering educators, and cultivating supportive micro-learning environments, *pesantren* can successfully navigate the paradox of modern language education. Transforming foreign language learning into a culturally responsive, emotionally safe, and religiously aligned experience enables Islamic boarding schools to equip *santri* with global communicative competence while steadfastly upholding their core Islamic identity and values.

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