



## **English Learning Challenges among Islamic Religious Education Students in Pesantren-Based Universities: A Contextual EFL Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

English language proficiency is increasingly important in teacher education programs, as it enables prospective teachers to access global pedagogical knowledge and engage in professional learning communities. However, non-English majors at faith-based institutions often face challenges in learning English. This qualitative study examines the English language learning challenges experienced by Islamic Religious Education (PAI) students at a pesantren-based university in Indonesia. Using semi-structured interviews, reflective writing, and classroom observations involving 24 PAI students, the study employed thematic analysis to explore linguistic difficulties, contextual barriers, and tensions between English language learning and professional identity formation. Using semi-structured interviews, reflective writing, and classroom observations involving 24 PAI students, the study employed thematic analysis to explore linguistic difficulties, contextual barriers, and tensions between English language learning and professional identity formation. The findings suggest that challenges to learning English extend beyond linguistic limitations to include institutional marginalization of English, limited disciplinary relevance, and a hierarchical language ideology that prioritizes Arabic over English. These challenges influence students' motivation and perceptions, as they consider English secondary to their future teaching roles. This study advocates for a contextualized English as a Foreign Language (EFL) approach to teacher education, proposing an English for Islamic Teacher Education orientation that aligns language learning with Islamic pedagogical practices. Implications for teacher educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers seeking to develop linguistically inclusive and contextually sensitive teacher education programs are discussed.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

English has become an essential part of teacher education programs worldwide. It helps future teachers engage with global teaching knowledge, academic research, and international professional communities (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Hyland, 2006). For pre-service teachers in non-English-speaking countries, English proficiency is seen as a key form of professional capital. It supports lifelong learning, reflective practice, and access to global educational discussions (Kubanyiova & Feryok, 2015; Sachs, 2005). Therefore, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction in teacher education deserves careful consideration, especially for students focused on areas outside of English education.

Research on EFL teacher education has shown that non-English major pre-service teachers face many challenges in developing practical English skills. This includes difficulties in academic reading, speaking, and teaching communication (Al-Jarrah & Ismail, 2018; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012). These issues are not just about language but are closely tied to pre-service teachers' professional identities, beliefs about learning languages, and views on the relevance of English to their future teaching roles (Borg, 2006; Helgevold et al., 2015). When they see English as unrelated to their teaching practice, pre-service teachers often show less engagement and commitment to learning the language.

In Indonesia, the experience of learning English among pre-service teachers is influenced by complex social and institutional factors. Studies show that many teacher education students have limited English skills despite years of English instruction in school (Lie, 2017). Researchers argue that English learning in Indonesian teacher education often lacks context. It focuses more on grammar than on using the language in meaningful ways (Warschauer et al., 2013). This issue is especially pronounced in faith-based teacher education institutions, where curricular priorities and educational approaches differ from secular universities.

Pesantren-based universities, which integrate Islamic boarding school traditions into higher education, represent a distinctive site of teacher education in Indonesia. These institutions aim to produce graduates who are not only pedagogically competent but also morally grounded and religiously committed educators (Siswati et al., 2023). In this educational setting, students of Islamic Religious Education (Pendidikan Agama Islam/PAI) prepare to be future teachers of Islamic studies in schools and madrasahs. While Arabic is central as the language of religious scholarship, English often serves as a secondary subject. This shapes how pre-service teachers view its importance to their professional identity (Sari, 2023).

Existing research on English language education in pesantren contexts has primarily focused on instructional practices at the secondary level or on teachers' classroom strategies (Umar, 2022). However, there has been little empirical study on PAI students' experiences learning English in pesantren-based universities. This gap matters because PAI graduates are increasingly expected to engage with global Islamic teaching discussions, access international research, and participate in cross-cultural educational contexts that require English skills.

From a teacher education perspective, understanding pre-service teachers' language learning challenges is crucial, as these experiences influence their future classroom practices, attitudes toward professional development, and openness to pedagogical innovation (Borg, 2006). Recent scholarship in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and language teacher cognition suggests that aligning language learning with disciplinary content and teaching practice enhances both motivation and pedagogical transferability (Hyland, 2006; Kubanyiova & Feryok, 2015). For PAI students, this highlights the need for an English approach that ties language learning to Islamic teaching and educational tasks.

Adopting a contextual EFL perspective, this study conceptualizes English learning as embedded within the sociocultural, institutional, and ideological conditions of pesantren-based teacher education (P. A. Duff, 2010; Norton, 2013). By focusing on PAI students' experiences as pre-service teachers, this research aims to shed light on how language learning challenges relate to their professional identity and teaching preparation. Addressing this relationship is essential for creating teacher education programs that are inclusive and responsive to linguistic needs.

This study has several research questions including what English learning challenges are experienced by Islamic Religious Education students as pre-service teachers in pesantren-based universities?, how do institutional and sociocultural contexts shape PAI students' engagement with English learning in teacher education programs?, and how do PAI students perceive the role of English in relation to their future professional identity as Islamic education teachers?.

Accordingly, this study investigates the English learning challenges faced by Islamic Religious Education students in pesantren-based universities, with particular attention to their positioning as future teachers. By doing so, the study aims to contribute to the literature on teacher education, EFL learning, and professional identity development in faith-based higher education contexts.

## **METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative research design focusing on descriptive and interpretive approaches to capture the experiences, beliefs, and views of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) students regarding English learning in pesantren-based teacher education programs. Such an approach aligns with the epistemological stance in teaching and teacher education that emphasizes understanding teacher learning and professional identity through participants' voices and contextualized practices. The study was conducted at a pesantren-based university in Bangil, Indonesia, which integrates Islamic boarding school traditions into its teacher education curriculum. Participants were 24 undergraduate PAI students enrolled in an English course designed for non-English majors, positioned as pre-service Islamic education teachers preparing for future roles in schools and madrasahs. A purposive sampling technique was used to select these participants based on specific criteria: enrollment in the PAI program, completion of at least one semester of English instruction, and active involvement in pesantren academic life (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Data were collected through multiple qualitative instruments to ensure depth and triangulation, including semi-structured interviews to explore perceptions of challenges and professional aspirations, reflective written responses to articulate emotional engagement, and classroom observations to document learning behaviors and interactional dynamics during instruction. This multi-method approach strengthened the trustworthiness of the findings and enabled a holistic understanding of the learning context. The data were then analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework—familiarization, coding, theme development, review, naming, and interpretation—focusing on recurring patterns related to linguistic challenges, contextual constraints, and professional identity formation (Miles et al., 2014). To enhance credibility, the researcher employed member checking and peer debriefing throughout the analysis process.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This section presents and discusses the findings of the study through an integrated analytical lens. Rather than separating results from discussion, the analysis is organized thematically to highlight how English learning challenges experienced by PAI students are shaped by linguistic, institutional, and professional identity factors within pesantren-based teacher education contexts. Such integration is consistent with qualitative reporting conventions in *Teaching and Teacher Education*, which emphasize interpretive depth and theoretical engagement.

### **Linguistic Challenges and Restricted Academic English Development**

Participants in this study consistently reported profound difficulties in mastering the core components of academic English, with particular struggles identified in vocabulary development, reading comprehension, and oral communication. The qualitative data revealed that many students felt overwhelmed when tasked with reading academic texts, especially peer-reviewed journal articles, theoretical frameworks, or English-language teaching materials. They frequently described these texts as linguistically dense, heavily laden with unfamiliar academic jargon, and conceptually distant from their prior educational experiences. Consequently, students reported spending an excessive amount of time decoding individual words rather than comprehending the broader pedagogical concepts, which often led to frustration, cognitive overload, and a reluctance to engage with English literature.

These empirical findings strongly align with previous research indicating that university students majoring in non-English disciplines frequently suffer from a lack of sufficient exposure to rigorous academic English input. This lack of continuous and meaningful exposure inevitably results in a limited lexical repertoire and significantly reduced reading fluency (Al-Jarrah & Ismail, 2018; Nation, 2013). In the specific context of teacher education, such linguistic limitations carry profound consequences. Academic reading is not merely a course requirement; it constitutes a primary mode of lifelong professional learning and development. As Hyland (2006) argues, access to disciplinary knowledge is fundamentally mediated through language. Therefore, insufficient English proficiency effectively serves as a structural barrier, restricting these pre-service Islamic education teachers' ability to engage meaningfully with global pedagogical discourse, innovative teaching methodologies, and international educational research.

Furthermore, the challenges extended beyond cognitive and linguistic domains into the affective realm. Participants expressed heightened levels of anxiety, self-consciousness, and a severe lack of confidence when required to speak English during classroom interactions or presentations. Students often admitted to remaining silent during discussions to avoid the perceived embarrassment of making grammatical errors or mispronouncing words in front of their peers and lecturers. This affective dimension of language learning deeply echoes MacIntyre and Gregersen's (2012) findings on foreign language anxiety. Their work suggests that negative emotional factors—such as the fear of peer evaluation—interact reciprocally with existing linguistic limitations to further constrain student participation and limit opportunities for communicative practice.

From a broader teacher education perspective, these intertwined linguistic and affective experiences are highly critical. The struggles these students face during their pre-service training may profoundly influence how they conceptualize language learning and manage classroom communication in their future careers (Le & Bui, 2024; Nketsia & Carroll, 2023). There is a significant risk that pre-service teachers who experience English primarily through a lens of anxiety, struggle, and inadequacy may inadvertently reproduce similar affective barriers in their own future teaching practices. If not addressed, this could lead to a generation of educators who hesitate to incorporate global resources, bilingual instructional strategies, or international perspectives into their Islamic education classrooms, thereby limiting the educational horizons of their future students.

### **English Learning, Motivation, and Professional Identity Formation**

Beyond evident linguistic difficulties, the findings of this study reveal a profound tension between the demands of English language learning and the participants' emerging professional identities as pre-service Islamic education teachers. Many participants openly articulated that

English was not perceived as an integral component of their future teaching roles. This stands in stark contrast to their perception of Arabic, which is widely regarded as absolutely essential for establishing religious authority and pedagogical legitimacy in the eyes of both their students and the wider pesantren community. This deeply rooted perception directly reflects what Borg (2006) conceptualizes as teacher cognition—a set of beliefs powerfully shaped by the students' prior educational experiences and the prevailing institutional discourse of their learning environment.

In pesantren-based universities, the academic ecosystem naturally positions Arabic as the primary scholarly language for examining authoritative Islamic texts. As a consequence, English is frequently framed in a marginalized manner, viewed merely as a supplementary subject or an instrumental tool required to fulfill graduation criteria. Such hierarchical language ideologies—where one language is structurally elevated while another is sidelined—have a significant impact on pre-service teachers' motivation and psychological investment in English learning, as described in Norton's (2013) framework on identity and language learning. Students naturally tend to invest less cognitive and emotional effort in a course that they believe will not directly contribute to their future professional legitimacy or day-to-day teaching reality.

Importantly, however, the qualitative data showed that the participants did not reject English outright. Instead, they experienced an internal struggle as they attempted to reconcile the relevance of this global language with their highly specific professional aspirations in Islamic education. This nuanced finding strongly resonates with Sachs' (2005) notion that professional identity is not static, but rather a dynamic construct that must be continuously negotiated over time. When English language instruction is disconnected from Islamic pedagogical contexts and practices, it is unsurprising that pre-service teachers view it as a mere external academic requirement rather than a valuable professional resource. Therefore, for teacher educators, this phenomenon highlights an urgent need to redesign curricula; specifically, by explicitly and intentionally connecting English instruction to students' future teaching roles, ensuring it aligns with their professional development pathways in a globalized era.

### **Institutional Constraints in Pesantren-Based Teacher Education**

Beyond the internal cognitive and affective struggles of the students, this study identified profound structural and institutional factors within the pesantren-based university that actively constrained effective English language learning. Participants frequently reported that their English learning experience was severely hampered by logistical limitations, such as heavily restricted instructional time and excessively large class sizes. These physical constraints make it nearly impossible for instructors to provide individualized feedback or facilitate the active, communicative speaking practices necessary for language acquisition. Furthermore, the prescribed curriculum predominantly emphasized strict grammatical accuracy and rote, textbook-based exercises over communicative competence or pedagogically meaningful use of the language. Consequently, pre-service teachers were essentially taught *about* English rules rather than *how to use* English effectively in their future Islamic education classrooms.

Additionally, the institutional structure heavily isolated English courses from the core PAI coursework, resulting in a fragmented learning experience characterized by minimal interdisciplinary integration. Because the English syllabus was generic and not tailored to the specific themes of Islamic education, students found it exceedingly difficult to transfer their language skills to their primary field of study. These institutional conditions are not entirely unique to this specific

university; rather, they reflect broader, systemic critiques of English education across Indonesian higher education. As noted by prominent researchers in the field, English in Indonesia is frequently taught merely as a standalone, compulsory subject to pass, rather than functioning as a dynamic medium for broader academic exploration and professional engagement (Puspitasari, 2025; Zein et al., 2020).

However, within the specific sociocultural milieu of pesantren-based universities, this separation is further reinforced and complicated by rigid curricular priorities that fundamentally privilege and allocate the majority of academic resources to religious and Arabic-medium subjects. From a contextual EFL perspective, these compelling findings clearly underscore Duff's (2010) theoretical argument that language learning is never a neutral, isolated cognitive process (A. S. Duff, 2023); it is deeply and inseparably embedded within the surrounding institutional practices, power dynamics, and overarching value systems. When a language like English is structurally marginalized within the university's hierarchy of knowledge, students' active engagement, motivation, and perceived value of the subject are inevitably and negatively affected. For teacher education programs operating in faith-based contexts, this structural reality raises critical and urgent questions regarding holistic curriculum design and the strategic positioning of English as a vital, integrated component of modern professional preparation.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the English language learning challenges experienced by Islamic Religious Education (PAI) students at pesantren-based universities are multifaceted, arising from an intersection of linguistic, institutional, and identity-related factors. Linguistically, students face significant barriers in mastering academic vocabulary and overcoming speaking anxiety, which hinders their engagement with global pedagogical resources. Institutionally, the challenges are exacerbated by limited instructional time, large class sizes, and a curriculum that remains isolated from the students' core disciplinary needs. Most significantly, the research highlights a tension between English learning and professional identity, where a hierarchical language ideology prioritizes Arabic for religious legitimacy, positioning English as a secondary or supplementary skill. Therefore, answering the research problem requires a strategic shift toward an "English for Islamic Teacher Education" orientation, which intentionally aligns language instruction with Islamic pedagogical practices and the professional aspirations of future PAI teachers.

Despite the insights gained, this research has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. The study was conducted at a single pesantren-based university with a specific group of 24 PAI students, which may limit the broader generalizability of the findings to different types of faith-based institutions. Additionally, the qualitative nature of the study provides an in-depth look at perceptions but does not measure long-term linguistic proficiency outcomes. For future research, it is suggested to conduct longitudinal studies involving multiple pesantren-based universities across different regions to capture a more comprehensive landscape of EFL challenges. Furthermore, subsequent studies could explore the integration of simple digital tools or Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to bridge the gap between English instruction and Islamic studies, investigating how technology can facilitate a more context-sensitive and engaging learning environment for pre-service teachers.

## DECLARATION OF AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

In the preparation of this manuscript, the author utilized ChatGPT and Gemini to assist with improving the readability, linguistic structure, and grammatical accuracy of the text. All outputs generated by these artificial intelligence tools were subsequently reviewed and revised by the author, who assumes full responsibility for the final content of the publication. The author confirms that these AI tools were used only as supporting instruments for language refinement and not for generating original research ideas, data analysis, or substantive scientific conclusions.

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