

Implementing Bilingual Education Environment in Islamic Boarding Schools: An Effort in Instilling Intercultural Dimensions

^{1*}**Yek Amin Azis, ²Muhammad Syukron, ³Hardi Nugraha**

¹English Language Education, Faculty of Tarbiyah, Universitas Islam Negeri, Jln. Gajah Mada No. 100 Jempong Baru Kota, Mataram, Indonesia

²English Literature, Faculty of Culture and Humaniora, UIN Datokarama Palu, Jl. Diponegoro No.23, Lere, Kota Palu, Sulawesi Tengah, Indonesia

³Master of TESOL, Faculty of Languages and English, Griffith University, 170 Kessels Rd, Nathan QLD 4111, Australia

*Corresponding Author Email: yekaminazis@uinmataram.ac.id

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Abstract

This study explores how bilingual education practices in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) shape students' Arabic and English language development and how intercultural dimensions influence the effectiveness of bilingual instruction. Positioned within a culturally and religiously grounded environment, Arabic is primarily associated with scripture, ritual, and classical Islamic scholarship, while English is framed as a gateway to global knowledge, academic mobility, and broader intercultural engagement. Adopting a qualitative interpretive case study design, the research involved ten government-certified EFL teachers with at least ten years of teaching experience in pesantren. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations, and analyzed using thematic analysis with inductive and deductive coding. The findings reveal a functional separation of languages that generates complementary yet unequal domains of use: students develop strong passive competence in religious Arabic but limited communicative fluency, while English instruction incorporates some communicative activities but remains constrained by exam pressures, large classes, and institutional routines. Translanguaging practices support comprehension but may inadvertently reduce extended target-language use. Intercultural dimensions enhance bilingual instruction when teachers act as cultural mediators, linking global issues and diverse Muslim experiences to Islamic values; however, concerns about moral risks lead some teachers to restrict authentic materials, narrowing intercultural exposure. The study contributes theoretically by highlighting the interplay between language policy, pedagogy, pesantren culture, and intercultural framing, and practically by underscoring the need for sustained teacher professional development and context-sensitive bilingual policies in faith-based education.

Keywords: Bilingual education; Islamic boarding schools; Intercultural competence; Arabic–English instruction; Innovative language education

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INTRODUCTION

The implementation of a bilingual education environment in Islamic boarding schools, or pesantren, represents a growing educational shift in Indonesia as these institutions attempt to integrate Arabic and English into their curricular and daily practices (Nurabianti & Farah, 2024; Al Janaideh et al., 2021). Historically, pesantren

have prioritized Arabic due to its centrality in understanding classical Islamic texts, jurisprudence, and exegetical traditions. However, globalization and the national demand for enhanced English proficiency have compelled many pesantren to expand beyond this classical orientation, positioning English as a tool for international communication, academic mobility, and broader intercultural engagement (Tahir & Maarof, 2021; Eliawati et al., 2024). This dual focus has created a unique bilingual ecosystem in which both languages serve distinct yet overlapping functions: Arabic as the language of religious heritage, and English as the language of scientific discourse and global participation. As pesantren evolve into more hybridized learning environments, they face complex pedagogical, sociolinguistic, and policy-related challenges that necessitate deeper scholarly examination.

Despite the growing popularity of bilingual programs, many pesantren struggle to formulate and sustain coherent language policies. Research indicates that language use remains inconsistent, leading to significant differences in students' proficiency levels across Arabic and English (Huang et al., 2023; Guzula, 2018). These disparities are exacerbated by the absence of a clear pedagogical framework that accommodates both languages' functional goals. As a result, students often develop passive linguistic knowledge—capable of memorizing vocabulary or reciting rules—without achieving active communicative competence (Huang et al., 2023). Past attempts to resolve these issues have involved policy adjustments and increased exposure to target languages; however, implementation remains fragmented due to insufficient teacher training, limited immersion opportunities, and the complex interplay between religious obligations and modern language learning (Jayanti & Sujarwo, 2019). In a context where Arabic carries deep spiritual significance and English symbolizes global opportunity, pesantren educators must navigate competing ideological and pedagogical pressures.

Curriculum development within this bilingual environment must also take into account the cultural and symbolic weight of Arabic in Islamic education while constructing meaningful spaces for English acquisition. Scholars argue that translanguaging—the strategic use of students' full linguistic repertoires—may offer a responsive pedagogical approach, allowing learners to fluidly navigate between languages while making meaningful connections between Islamic knowledge and global discourses (Menken & Sánchez, 2019). This approach aligns with contemporary notions of hybridity in education, which emphasize flexible, culturally grounded learning frameworks that prepare students for multilingual realities (Cervantes-Soon et al., 2017). Nevertheless, the specialized roles of Arabic and English require differentiated instructional strategies, as Arabic is frequently used for scriptural reasoning and ritual texts, whereas English instruction is shaped by the demands of globalization and modern literacy (Hsieh et al., 2025; Ali, 2020). Past efforts to balance these instructional demands have often struggled due to teachers' limited pedagogical repertoire, outdated instructional materials, and insufficient alignment between policy aspirations and classroom realities (Azzam, 2019).

Instructional challenges also persist within pesantren, particularly in terms of teacher preparation and pedagogical practices. Arabic instruction has long been dominated by grammar-translation and rote memorization methods, which, although historically effective for textual mastery, do not support the development of oral

fluency or authentic communication. Ekawati et al. (2024) note that such methods often lead to native-language interference, influencing students' phonological and syntactic accuracy in Arabic. English language instruction faces similar issues; many pesantren adopt practices that contradict communicative language teaching principles, resulting in limited opportunities for authentic interaction (Shahabullah et al., 2025). The hierarchical and highly disciplined pesantren environment may further restrict students' chances to practice English or Arabic outside formal classroom settings, contributing to language anxiety, code-mixing, and fossilized errors (Murtadho et al., 2025; Varsat, 2024). Past interventions—including English camps, language duty systems, and peer-mentoring programs—have produced improvements, yet they often lack sustainability due to inadequate teacher mentorship and inconsistent immersion support (Tali & Belhaj, 2025).

These instructional and sociocultural challenges demonstrate the need for new bilingual models that integrate intercultural dimensions. Bilingual education in pesantren cannot merely aim to teach linguistic structures; it must also cultivate intercultural awareness, enabling students to interpret cultural meanings embedded in Arabic and English, negotiate cross-cultural communication, and critically engage with global perspectives while maintaining Islamic identity. Studies reveal that bilingual educational frameworks can enhance students' intercultural sensitivity and broaden their understanding of diverse worldviews when implemented through reflective and culturally grounded pedagogies (Mula-Falcón, 2021). Models such as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) encourage learners to analyze Islamic ethics in relation to global cultural practices, thereby enriching both language and intercultural competence (Parra, 2020). Past initiatives involving project-based learning and multilingual resource integration have shown promise in fostering empathy, critical thinking, and cultural adaptability—skills essential for 21st-century learners (Milian & Walker, 2019; Ratnadewi et al., 2020).

Effective implementation of these intercultural bilingual approaches requires strengthening teacher training, particularly in multicultural education and bilingual pedagogies. Teachers must function not only as linguistic instructors but also as cultural mediators who guide students through the complexities of global and Islamic cultural interactions (Fitrianti, 2021; Tahir & Maarof, 2021). Previous efforts to improve teacher capacity have included short-term workshops and curriculum revisions, but long-term, systemic professional development remains limited. Additionally, comprehensive bilingual policies and immersive language environments are essential for fostering continuity between formal learning and daily communication practices in pesantren (Murtadho, 2023). Community and family engagement have also been identified as influential factors that support sustained bilingual development among learners (Murtadho, 2023).

The objectives of the research are to analyze the challenges and opportunities of bilingual education in pesantren, examine the role of intercultural learning within this environment, and propose a sustainable pedagogical model that integrates linguistic proficiency with intercultural competence. The novelty of this study lies in its comprehensive focus on intercultural bilingual pedagogy within pesantren—an area often overlooked by previous research that typically isolates linguistic or religious dimensions rather than examining their intersection within a dynamic educational

ecosystem. Based on these gaps, this study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How do bilingual education practices in pesantren shape students' Arabic and English language development within a culturally and religiously grounded environment?

RQ2: In what ways do intercultural dimensions influence the effectiveness of bilingual instruction in Islamic boarding schools?

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design, specifically utilizing an interpretive case study approach to explore the complexities of bilingual education practices and intercultural dimensions in Islamic boarding schools. A qualitative design is most suitable because the research questions focus on understanding teachers' lived experiences, perceptions, and instructional practices within a culturally embedded educational environment. The nuanced interactions between Arabic and English instruction, teacher identity, institutional norms, and intercultural learning dynamics cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures alone. Qualitative inquiry allows in-depth exploration of these contextual realities, revealing not only what happens within bilingual classrooms but also why such practices occur and how teachers make pedagogical decisions in balancing religious and global orientations. The design is therefore aligned with the study's objectives to examine challenges, opportunities, and pedagogical implications that emerge from bilingual education in pesantren.

The qualitative approach also supports the exploration of intercultural elements, which require attention to subtleties such as teachers' attitudes toward cultural diversity, interpretations of global cultural texts, and the negotiation of Islamic values within bilingual instruction. These aspects involve subjective meaning-making that is best accessed through open-ended, dialogic, and interactive research methods. While qualitative research strengthens contextual understanding, it also presents certain limitations. Potential biases may arise from the researcher's positionality, including preexisting familiarity with pesantren contexts or prior knowledge of bilingual education. To mitigate these concerns, reflexive journaling was employed throughout the study to monitor personal assumptions and ensure transparency in data interpretation. Another challenge relates to the limited generalizability inherent in qualitative research. This was addressed by selecting participants with diverse teaching backgrounds within pesantren and by providing thick descriptions of the research setting to enable transferability. Triangulation of data through interviews and observations further strengthened credibility and reduced the influence of single-source bias.

Participants

The participants in this study consist of ten English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers from various Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia. All participants meet two selection criteria: they have a minimum of ten years of teaching experience, and they are certified EFL teachers officially recognized by the Indonesian government. These criteria ensure that participants have substantial pedagogical expertise, familiarity with bilingual program implementation, and professional grounding in

English language education. By selecting teachers with long-term teaching experience, the study captures informed perspectives on the evolution of bilingual practices within pesantren, as well as how institutional dynamics influence language instruction. Furthermore, involving government-certified teachers ensures that the participants are professionally trained, experienced in curriculum implementation, and capable of providing insights into both policy-level directives and classroom-level realities. The purposive sampling strategy aligns with the qualitative orientation of the research, enabling the selection of participants who can offer rich, relevant, and informed data on bilingual education practices.

Instruments and Data Collection Technique

Two primary instruments were used to collect data: semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. The interview protocol was developed based on a review of literature on bilingual education, translanguaging practices, intercultural language learning, and pesantren pedagogy. Questions were designed to elicit information about teachers' experiences, instructional strategies, perceived challenges, and views on intercultural dimensions within bilingual teaching. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility for participants to expand on their responses while maintaining alignment with the study's overarching objectives. To ensure validity, the interview guide underwent expert review by two university lecturers specializing in language education and qualitative methodology. Their feedback resulted in refining the clarity, sequencing, and cultural sensitivity of the interview questions.

Observation guidelines were adapted from established frameworks for classroom discourse analysis and bilingual instructional practices. The observation sheet focused on teaching strategies, language alternation patterns, student engagement, intercultural references, and the instructional use of Arabic and English within classroom interactions. Observations were conducted openly, with teachers informed in advance about the purpose and scope of the procedure. To enhance reliability, pilot observations were carried out in one pesantren that was not part of the main study. The pilot process helped identify ambiguous items and adjust observation categories to improve focus and accuracy. The use of multiple instruments allowed methodological triangulation, adding depth and credibility to the findings.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a systematic qualitative procedure grounded in thematic analysis. All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, and observation notes were compiled immediately after each session to preserve contextual accuracy. Analysis began with repeated readings of the transcripts to develop familiarity with the data. Initial coding involved identifying meaningful units of information related to bilingual practices, teacher identity, pedagogical challenges, intercultural learning, and institutional influences. Both inductive and deductive coding strategies were employed. Deductive codes were informed by existing literature on bilingual education and intercultural pedagogy, while inductive codes emerged directly from participants' narratives and observed classroom behaviors.

Codes were then grouped into broader categories and refined into overarching themes using constant comparison techniques. During this stage, patterns were examined to identify similarities, differences, and relationships across data sources.

Observation data were used to corroborate or challenge insights gained from interviews, allowing triangulation and strengthening the authenticity of the themes. Throughout the analysis, memo writing was used to document analytical decisions, reflections, and emerging interpretations. Peer debriefing with two qualitative research experts contributed to ensuring the dependability of the findings. The final themes represent a holistic interpretation of the complexities of bilingual education and intercultural learning within Islamic boarding schools.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

How do bilingual education practices in pesantren shape students' Arabic and English language development within a culturally and religiously grounded environment?

The findings indicate that bilingual education practices in pesantren shape students' Arabic and English development through a functional separation of languages that mirrors the institution's religious and cultural priorities. Arabic is predominantly positioned as the language of scripture, ritual, and classical Islamic scholarship. Teachers consistently reported that Arabic is used in Qur'an recitation, kitab kuning classes, and daily supplications, which provides students with strong exposure to religious registers and formulaic expressions. This religious embedding of Arabic fosters high levels of passive understanding of key religious terms and texts, yet oral fluency beyond ritual and classroom recitation remains limited. In contrast, English is framed as a gateway to global knowledge, higher education, and international communication. English is commonly used in general subjects, language programs, and extracurricular activities such as English clubs or speech contests. This functional dichotomy encourages students to associate Arabic with piety and tradition, and English with modernity and future aspirations, thereby shaping their motivation and patterns of language use in distinct but complementary ways.

At the pedagogical level, bilingual practices in pesantren create a structured yet uneven environment for communicative development. Classroom observations showed that teachers frequently rely on grammar-translation and text-based explanation when teaching Arabic, emphasizing accuracy in reading and interpretation over spontaneous spoken interaction. This approach supports students' ability to decode religious texts but does not adequately develop conversational skills or creative language use in Arabic. For English, there is a stronger tendency toward communicative activities—such as pair work, role plays, and presentations—especially in classes taught by younger or more internationally exposed teachers. However, the implementation of communicative methods is often constrained by large class sizes, exam-oriented pressures, and limited time allocation. In both languages, translanguaging practices are visible: teachers move fluidly between Indonesian, Arabic, and English to clarify concepts, give instructions, and build rapport. Rather than signaling confusion, this patterned mixing helps students connect new linguistic forms with familiar concepts, although it sometimes reduces the demand for sustained discourse in the target language.

Pesantren culture itself plays a significant role in shaping language development by providing an intensive, value-laden environment that both supports and restricts language learning. The daily schedule—starting from early morning prayers to evening study sessions—immerses students in repeated exposure to religious Arabic

expressions and selected English phrases used in announcements or institutional slogans. This routine fosters discipline and regular contact with both languages. At the same time, the hierarchical structure and strong emphasis on obedience can make students hesitant to experiment linguistically or take risks in speaking English or Arabic, particularly in front of teachers or senior peers. Several participants mentioned that students fear making mistakes, which leads them to remain silent, rely on memorized scripts, or limit their language use to safe, formulaic utterances. Thus, bilingual practices in pesantren produce a learning environment rich in symbolic and textual exposure, but one that requires deliberate pedagogical effort to transform that exposure into confident, interactive proficiency in Arabic and English.

In what ways do intercultural dimensions influence the effectiveness of bilingual instruction in Islamic boarding schools?

The study shows that intercultural dimensions significantly enhance the effectiveness of bilingual instruction when teachers explicitly connect language learning with broader cultural and ethical reflections. Teachers who intentionally introduce English texts about global Muslim communities, humanitarian issues, or scientific developments often frame them through an Islamic lens, inviting students to compare values, behaviors, and social norms across cultures. In these classes, students are encouraged to discuss how Islamic principles such as justice, mercy, and honesty can be practiced in different societies. This intercultural framing deepens students' engagement with English, as they perceive it not merely as a foreign code but as a medium for understanding the ummah and the wider world. Similarly, Arabic is sometimes presented not only as a sacred language but also as a living language used in contemporary Arab societies, which helps students see Arabic as relevant beyond the ritual domain and encourages curiosity about diverse Muslim cultures.

Intercultural dimensions also influence effectiveness through the role of teachers as cultural mediators. Teachers with broader intercultural exposure – through study abroad, international conferences, or engagement with global media – tend to adopt more nuanced approaches in selecting and presenting learning materials. They carefully choose texts, videos, and examples that stimulate critical thinking without undermining Islamic values. For instance, some teachers reported using English articles on ethical dilemmas, environmental issues, or social media culture, and then guiding students to respond from an Islamic ethical standpoint. This practice simultaneously strengthens critical literacy, intercultural awareness, and language skills. In such classrooms, students appear more willing to speak, negotiate meaning, and express their viewpoints, indicating that intercultural content can lower affective barriers by making language tasks personally and spiritually meaningful.

However, the findings also reveal that intercultural dimensions can constrain bilingual instruction when they are viewed with suspicion or are not pedagogically managed. Some teachers expressed concerns about "Westernization" or moral degradation associated with certain English-language media. In response, they tend to limit exposure to authentic texts and rely heavily on sanitized, exam-oriented materials. While this approach protects students from content perceived as inappropriate, it also reduces opportunities for authentic communicative practice and critical engagement with real-world discourses. In such contexts, intercultural learning remains superficial or absent, and language instruction reverts to

decontextualized grammar and vocabulary exercises. This tension demonstrates that the effectiveness of bilingual instruction is closely linked to how intercultural elements are interpreted within the pesantren's religious framework. Where intercultural dimensions are integrated thoughtfully—highlighting both common values and differences—bilingual instruction becomes richer, more dialogic, and more empowering for students. Where they are avoided or feared, instruction tends to be narrower and less communicative.

Table 1. EFL Teachers' Responses in Bilingual Education Environment

Research Question	Emergent Theme	Description	Dominant Data Source
RQ1	Functional separation of languages	Arabic linked to scripture and ritual; English linked to globalization and academic aspirations, shaping distinct motivational orientations.	Teacher interviews, field notes
RQ1	Structured but uneven communicative practice	Grammar-translation dominates Arabic; partial use of communicative methods in English with constraints from time, exams, and class size.	Classroom observations, interviews
RQ1	Cultural discipline and linguistic risk-taking	Pesantren routines provide rich exposure but hierarchical culture and fear of mistakes limit spontaneous language use.	Classroom observations, teacher reflections
RQ2	Intercultural framing as motivational driver	Linking English and Arabic learning to global Muslim issues and ethical reflection increases engagement and meaningful language use.	Teacher interviews, lesson transcripts
RQ2	Teachers as cultural mediators	Teachers who bridge global content and Islamic values foster critical thinking, intercultural awareness, and more active classroom discourse.	Teacher interviews, observations
RQ2	Managed tension between protection and openness	Concerns about moral risks lead some teachers to restrict authentic materials, reducing intercultural depth and communicative opportunities.	Teacher interviews, policy documents

The findings from the study reveal key themes related to how language learning is approached in a religious and culturally sensitive context. The first research question focuses on the functional separation of languages, where Arabic is linked to religious scripture and rituals, while English is seen as a tool for globalization and academic progress. This distinction shapes different motivational orientations in students, with Arabic often being approached with a sense of reverence and traditional value, while English is viewed more pragmatically as a means to secure academic success and global engagement. Data from teacher interviews and field

notes emphasize how these separate purposes influence how students engage with each language.

Additionally, the study observes that language instruction is structured yet uneven. In Arabic instruction, a grammar-translation method is still prevalent, reflecting a more traditional approach. English, on the other hand, sees partial use of communicative methods, but these are often constrained by factors such as limited time, heavy exam focus, and large class sizes. These findings, derived from classroom observations and interviews, highlight the tension between traditional methods and the desire to introduce more communicative, student-centered practices. Furthermore, classroom observations and teacher reflections reveal that while the routines in Pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) provide rich exposure to language, a hierarchical culture rooted in respect and fear of making mistakes inhibits students' willingness to engage in spontaneous language use, limiting opportunities for risk-taking in language acquisition.

The second research question explores intercultural dynamics in the language classroom. The study finds that linking English and Arabic learning to broader global Muslim issues and ethical reflection serves as a strong motivational driver, enhancing student engagement and making language learning more meaningful. Teachers' interviews and lesson transcripts reveal that framing language learning within these contexts helps students connect more deeply with the material. Moreover, teachers play a pivotal role as cultural mediators, bridging the gap between global content and Islamic values. These teachers foster critical thinking, intercultural awareness, and promote more active classroom discourse. However, the study also identifies a managed tension between protection and openness, particularly in relation to the use of authentic materials. Concerns about potential moral risks lead some teachers to restrict the use of certain content, thereby limiting intercultural depth and reducing communicative opportunities. This tension is documented through teacher interviews and policy documents, indicating how institutional and cultural concerns can shape language teaching practices.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that bilingual education in pesantren is structured around a functional separation of Arabic and English, which deeply reflects the institutions' religious and cultural priorities. Arabic is positioned as the language of scripture, ritual, and classical scholarship, while English is framed as a vehicle for globalization, academic mobility, and access to contemporary knowledge. This configuration resonates with earlier research noting that Arabic in Islamic institutions is strongly tied to sacred literacy, whereas English is associated with worldly success and international communication (Tahir & Maarof, 2021; Eliawati et al., 2024). At the same time, this study extends previous work by showing how this functional division shapes students' motivational orientations: Arabic is linked to piety and identity, English to aspiration and opportunity, producing distinct but complementary domains of language use in everyday pesantren life.

These findings align with studies that highlight inconsistencies in bilingual language policy implementation in faith-based schools and the tendency for students to develop passive rather than active competence (Huang et al., 2023; Guzula, 2018). In the present study, teachers reported that students understand religious Arabic

terms and formulaic expressions but struggle with spontaneous spoken interaction, mirroring concerns about “text-heavy” linguistic competence also observed in other multilingual schooling contexts (Huang et al., 2023). This suggests that the widely documented gap between language policy and classroom practice persists in pesantren, where policy documents may advocate bilingualism, yet classroom activities remain dominated by grammar-translation and recitation. The study therefore confirms earlier critiques that without clear pedagogical frameworks and sustained professional development, bilingual policies risk becoming symbolic rather than transformative (Jayanti & Sujarwo, 2019; Azzam, 2019).

The prominence of grammar-translation methods in Arabic classes and the partial, often constrained use of communicative activities in English classes further situate the study within wider debates on pedagogy in EFL and Islamic education. Ekawati et al. (2024) observed that memorization-based Arabic teaching in Indonesian Islamic schools can trigger interference from students’ first language, affecting phonological and syntactic accuracy. The present findings echo this pattern: pesantren teachers acknowledge that students can recite texts accurately but face difficulties forming original sentences in Arabic. Similarly, Shahabullah et al. (2025) criticize English teaching practices that formally claim to be communicative but are, in reality, dominated by teacher talk and exam preparation. This study confirms that pattern, showing that while some communicative tasks are implemented—especially by younger or more internationally exposed teachers—their impact is limited by large class sizes, assessment demands, and institutional routines. Thus, the study consolidates existing evidence that method innovation alone is insufficient without structural support for meaningful interactional time and smaller learner-teacher ratios.

In contrast to deficit-only narratives, the findings also demonstrate the productive role of translanguaging and hybrid practices in pesantren. Teachers frequently draw on Indonesian, Arabic, and English to explain concepts, manage the classroom, and build rapport, reflecting the translanguaging perspective that learners’ full linguistic repertoires are resources rather than problems (Menken & Sánchez, 2019). This corresponds with models of hybridity in bilingual education that advocate flexible movement across codes to scaffold understanding and identity formation (Cervantes-Soon et al., 2017). However, the study adds nuance by showing that while translanguaging supports comprehension and affective connection, it can also reduce the demand for sustained target-language discourse if not deliberately managed. This dual effect suggests that translanguaging in pesantren needs to be strategically planned, not only tolerated, so that support in Indonesian does not unintentionally displace opportunities for extended interaction in Arabic and English.

The influence of pesantren culture on language learning emerged as another key theme, particularly the way discipline, hierarchy, and religious routines shape linguistic risk-taking. Prior research has noted that highly regulated school environments can intensify language anxiety and silence learners who fear negative evaluation (Varsat, 2024). This study supports those conclusions: students’ reluctance to speak, reliance on memorized formulas, and fear of making mistakes in front of teachers or seniors all point to affective barriers embedded in institutional culture. At the same time, the intensive schedule—from dawn prayers to evening study—creates

frequent exposure to religious Arabic and selected English phrases, demonstrating that the same structure that limits risk-taking also ensures sustained contact with the languages (Murtadho et al., 2025). This tension highlights a theoretical implication: models of bilingualism in faith-based settings must account not only for input quantity and method, but also for power relations, obedience norms, and the moral framing of language use.

A central contribution of this study lies in its analysis of intercultural dimensions within bilingual instruction. The findings show that when teachers consciously frame English and Arabic learning through ethical and cultural reflection—for example, by discussing global Muslim communities, humanitarian issues, or social practices in Muslim-majority and non-Muslim societies—students engage more deeply and view languages as tools for understanding the ummah and the wider world. This is consistent with Mula-Falcón's (2021) argument that bilingual education can foster intercultural sensitivity when learners are guided to interpret cultural meanings, not merely memorize forms. The study also supports Parra's (2020) claim that Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) can be used to connect disciplinary content with linguistic development; here, teachers use English texts about global issues and then invite students to respond through Islamic ethical lenses, integrating language learning with moral reasoning.

The findings further resonate with Milian and Walker (2019) and Ratnadewi et al. (2020), who emphasize the role of project-based, multilingual, and culturally grounded tasks in promoting empathy and critical thinking. In classrooms where teachers act as cultural mediators—selecting texts that are both globally relevant and religiously sensitive—students are more willing to participate, negotiate meaning, and express personal viewpoints. This suggests that intercultural framing can lower affective filters and enhance perceived relevance, strengthening both communicative confidence and identity affirmation. Theoretically, this supports models of intercultural communicative competence that view language learning as inseparable from ethical positioning and identity work, particularly in settings where religion is central to learners' self-understanding.

However, the study also documents how intercultural dimensions may constrain instruction when they are equated with moral danger or unchecked Westernization. Some teachers expressed concern about exposing students to authentic English media, leading them to restrict materials to sanitized, exam-oriented texts. This pattern parallels broader debates in Islamic education regarding the perceived risks of "foreign" cultural content and the resulting preference for decontextualized exercises (Ali, 2020). The consequence, as observed in this study, is a narrowing of both language input and intercultural learning opportunities. This finding complicates optimistic accounts of intercultural education by illustrating that its success depends on whether teachers and institutions perceive intercultural content as compatible with, rather than threatening to, local religious values.

Practically, the findings underscore the importance of sustained professional development for teachers in areas of bilingual pedagogy, intercultural communication, and curriculum design. Echoing Fitrianti (2021) and Tahir and Maarof (2021), this study shows that teachers who have broader intercultural exposure—through overseas study, international networks, or rich engagement with global

media—tend to design more dialogic and reflective learning experiences. Such teachers are better able to filter, adapt, and contextualize resources without abandoning authenticity, positioning themselves as cultural mediators rather than gatekeepers. This suggests that teacher education programs and in-service training for pesantren should prioritize intercultural competence alongside linguistic and methodological expertise.

At the policy level, the study points to the need for more integrated bilingual and intercultural policies that move beyond symbolic goals to concrete guidelines on language use, curriculum content, and assessment. Murtadho (2023) highlights the role of immersive environments and community involvement in sustaining bilingual development; this study reinforces that view by showing how family and community engagement could support the alignment of pesantren bilingual practices with societal expectations for both religious commitment and global readiness. Policy frameworks should therefore encourage partnerships between pesantren, universities, and local communities to co-develop materials and programs that reflect Islamic values while opening windows to diverse cultures.

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DECLARATION OF USING AI TOOLS

This study involved the assistance of Artificial Intelligence-based tools, including ChatGPT, to support various stages of academic writing. AI tools were used solely for language refinement, generating drafts of descriptive sections, and organizing ideas in the introduction, findings, and discussion sections. All AI-generated content was thoroughly reviewed, verified, and edited by the researcher to ensure accuracy, academic integrity, and alignment with the study's objectives. No part of the analysis, interpretation of data, or final conclusions was outsourced to AI; these components were conducted independently by the researcher based on the collected empirical data.

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