

Pedagogical and Cultural Challenges in Teaching and Learning English at a Salafiyah Islamic Boarding School in Kendal: Teachers' Coping Strategies and Students' Responses

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the pedagogical and cultural challenges of teaching and learning English at a Salafiyah Islamic boarding school in Kendal Regency, as well as to examine EFL teachers' coping strategies and students' responses to English language teaching practices. This study employed a qualitative method with a case study approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis involving three EFL teachers as key informants and three students as supporting informants selected through purposive sampling. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, while trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation, member checking, and thick description. The findings reveal that pedagogical challenges include students' reluctance to speak due to fear of making mistakes, pronunciation difficulties, limited instructional resources and technology, insufficient learning time, student fatigue, and varied English proficiency levels. These challenges are reinforced by the culture of adab, the dominance of religious knowledge and Arabic, limited exposure to English outside the classroom, and the mismatch between some EFL materials and Islamic values. Teachers address these challenges through context-based material adaptation, scaffolding, integration of Islamic content, flexible language use, and affective encouragement. Students respond more actively when learning activities are culturally appropriate and relevant to their needs and future aspirations.

Introduction

English is an international language that plays a significant role in the globalization era. In Indonesia, teaching English has developed considerably, especially in formal education systems. Nowadays, the proficiency in English is considered important, not only in academic environment but also in social, economic, and even in religion. English has been a part of the national curriculum, even from the elementary school level. However, as Galloway (2023) explain that integrating local cultural contexts into English learning helps connect students' identities with language use.

English language teaching and learning still face various challenges, particularly in informal or semi-formal educational institutions. One of these institutions is the Islamic boarding school, commonly known as *pesantren*. Islamic boarding schools have distinctive characteristics that differentiate them from general educational institutions, as they primarily focus on Islamic studies, classical religious texts, and the development of moral and spiritual values.

Consequently, general subjects such as English often receive limited attention in terms of curriculum design, teaching strategies, and supporting resources. Institutional priorities and educational contexts play a significant role in shaping language teaching practices and the allocation of resources for English instruction (Widodo, 2022).

Furthermore, the implementation of English language teaching in such contexts is often influenced by cultural and religious considerations, which may affect both teachers' pedagogical decisions and students' engagement in the learning process. As noted by Kirkpatrick (2021), English language teaching in Asian contexts must adapt to local sociocultural values and institutional demands. This indicates that the challenges in teaching English in pesantren are not only pedagogical but also deeply rooted in cultural and institutional dynamics. This is understandable, considering that the main goal of Islamic boarding school is to produce pious and noble individuals rather than academically competitive graduates. Language programs need to align with learners' needs, purposes, and cultural orientations, particularly in religious educational settings (Macaro, 2018).

However, in recent years, the demand for santri (students who learn and live in Islamic boarding school) to have foreign language skills, especially English, is increasing. Many graduates of Islamic boarding school continue their study abroad, get involved in international dakwah, or participate in activities in global social and religious organizations. Unfortunately, their English skills are often still limited due to the lack of support from the environment of Islamic boarding school. Students from EFL contexts often experience difficulties in higher education due to limited exposure to English during earlier stages of learning (Macaro, 2018). English teaching in expanding circle contexts such as Indonesia requires not only linguistic instruction but also sociocultural adaptation (Galloway, 2023). EFL teachers in Salafiyah Islamic boarding schools are required not only to teach grammar and vocabulary, but also to adapt their teaching methods to the cultural background, Islamic values, and characteristics of the students. This condition causes EFL teachers to face challenges that are not only pedagogical, but also cultural. Teachers in culturally sensitive educational environments must balance instructional goals with learners' identities and institutional values, which can influence pedagogical decisions (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020).

Pedagogically, teachers often face difficulties in developing communicative and interesting learning methods. This is due to limited facilities or learning resources, limited learning time, and students' low motivation, including the basic abilities in English become the main constraints in the learning process. Motivation, exposure, and learner autonomy are key factors influencing successful language acquisition, all of which require a supportive learning environment (Harmer, 2015).

From the cultural side, the challenges faced by teachers become more complex. Some English teaching materials that may contain some elements of Western culture are sometimes considered not in line with Islamic values. Teachers often need to adapt teaching materials to the local culture of the Islamic boarding school, given the concern that foreign cultural content in English materials may be contradictory with the adopted values in the Islamic boarding school's environment. Teachers often need to adapt and filter teaching materials to ensure cultural appropriateness, particularly in contexts where local values strongly influence educational practices (Patanduk et al., 2025; Natasya et al., 2025). Language and culture are closely interconnected, and separating them in language teaching may lead to misunderstanding or rejection (Kirkpatrick, 2021; Trinh & Dinh, 2024; Ghorbani & Dowlatabadi, 2023).

This requires teachers to make adaptations, both by filtering the teaching content and by linking the material with Islamic values so that it can be acceptable by the students and the Islamic boarding school itself. Some teachers have to make adjustment strategies, such as simplifying the material, changing the teaching approach, or involving Islamic values in learning in order not to cause resistance from students and Islamic boarding school's policy.

In some cases, teachers also have to deal with the students' perspective who feel that English is not important, or from Islamic boarding school's administrators who view that English is not relevant to the identity of the Islamic boarding school. These challenges certainly have an impact on the effectiveness of teaching activities, student learning outcomes, and students' attitudes towards English itself. In this context, teachers play a dual role as foreign language teachers as well as cultural mediators. They must be able to both bridge the needs of English learning with the cultural reality and religious values of Islamic boarding school. EFL teachers in religious educational contexts are required to mediate between global language demands and local cultural values, which positions them not only as instructors but also as cultural negotiators (Kirkpatrick, 2021).

Based on those complexities, it is necessary to conduct in-depth research to explore the pedagogical and cultural challenges faced by EFL teachers in Salafiyah Islamic boarding school, especially in Kendal area. This research is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of real conditions in the field. It can also contribute to the development of English teaching strategies that are contextual and culturally sensitive, as well as aligned with Islamic values. Although previous studies have examined English language teaching in Islamic boarding schools, pedagogical challenges, and the influence of cultural and religious values on language learning, several aspects remain insufficiently explored. Previous research has generally discussed pedagogical constraints, such as limited instructional resources, students' low motivation, and restricted learning time, separately from cultural challenges involving religious values, institutional norms, and students' perceptions of English. Furthermore, studies on teaching adaptations have primarily described instructional techniques without comprehensively examining how teachers develop coping strategies to manage the interaction between pedagogical demands and cultural expectations. In particular, limited attention has been given to the relationship between teachers' coping strategies and students' responses within a specific Salafiyah Islamic boarding school context. Consequently, a more integrated understanding is needed of how pedagogical and cultural challenges intersect, how teachers respond to these challenges, and how students perceive and react to the resulting teaching practices.

To address this research gap, the present study investigates the pedagogical and cultural challenges encountered by EFL teachers in a Salafiyah Islamic boarding school in Kendal, Central Java. It specifically examines the factors contributing to these challenges, the coping strategies employed by teachers, and students' responses to English language teaching practices. Unlike studies that examine these dimensions independently, this research connects them within a single qualitative case study to explore their interrelationships in a particular religious and institutional setting. Its contribution lies in providing an empirically grounded and context-specific understanding of how teachers negotiate instructional demands, Islamic values, and students' learning needs through adaptive teaching practices. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of culturally responsive and pedagogically appropriate English language teaching approaches in traditional Islamic educational institutions.

Thus, EFL teachers in Salafiyah Islamic boarding school not only identify pedagogical and cultural challenges, but also develop coping strategies to adapt their teaching practices to the institutional and religious context. These strategies include selecting appropriate materials, adjusting teaching methods, and aligning curriculum expectations with Islamic values. Understanding these coping strategies is essential for gaining a comprehensive picture of English language teaching and learning in Salafiyah Islamic boarding schools.

Therefore, it is hoped that the results of this study will serve as a reference for educators, policymakers, and Islamic boarding school managers when formulating policies and approaches to teaching English that are more effective within the context of traditional Islamic education.

Method

Research Participants and Sampling Technique

This study involved six participants consisting of three EFL teachers (T1, T2, and T3) and three students (S1, S2, and S3) at a Salafiyah Islamic boarding school in Kendal, Central Java. The participants were selected using purposive sampling to obtain information relevant to the research objectives. The teacher participants were selected based on their active involvement in English teaching, teaching experience in the pesantren environment, and experience with pedagogical and cultural challenges. The student participants were selected based on their involvement in the English learning program and their ability to share their learning experiences and responses. The selection of three teachers and three students was intended to provide in-depth information within the specific context of this qualitative case study. The teachers provided information about pedagogical and cultural challenges and the strategies they used to address them, while the students contributed perspectives on classroom activities and their responses to English learning. The combination of these perspectives enabled the study to examine the research focus from both teaching and learning viewpoints.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, direct classroom observations, and document analysis. In-depth interviews were conducted with three EFL teachers and three students to explore teachers' experiences, challenges, coping strategies, and students' responses to English language teaching and learning. The interviews used open-ended questions to allow participants to explain their experiences and perspectives. Classroom observations were conducted across three teaching sessions. The observations focused on teacher–student interactions, teaching strategies, instructional media and materials, and students' engagement and participation. Observation notes were used to document classroom activities and provide contextual information to complement the interview findings. Document analysis was also conducted using lesson plans (Rencana Pelaksanaan Pembelajaran/RPP) and classroom observation sheets. These documents provided additional information about the teaching process and supported the interpretation of data obtained through interviews and observations.

Data Analysis Technique

The data were analysed using thematic analysis based on the stages described by Braun et al. (2019). The analysis involved six stages: familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. First, interview transcripts, classroom observation notes, and relevant documents were read and reviewed to develop an understanding of the collected data. Second, meaningful statements and information related to the research questions were identified and assigned initial

codes. Third, related codes were grouped into potential themes concerning pedagogical challenges, cultural challenges, teachers' coping strategies, and students' responses. These themes were then reviewed against the dataset to ensure their relevance and consistency. The themes were subsequently defined and named before being presented in a narrative report supported by direct participant quotations and evidence from classroom observations and documents.

Data Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the findings was addressed through triangulation, member checking, and thick description. Triangulation involved comparing information obtained from teacher and student interviews with classroom observation data and relevant documents, including lesson plans and observation sheets. This comparison was intended to identify areas of agreement and differences among the data sources. Member checking was included as a strategy to confirm the interpretation of participants' experiences. Thick description was used to present contextual details of English teaching and learning in the *pesantren* environment. These strategies were intended to support the credibility and contextual understanding of the findings.

Result and Discussion

Pedagogical and Cultural Challenges Faced by EFL Teachers

Pedagogical Challenges Faced by EFL Teachers

Low Student Confidence and Reluctance in Speaking

The finding that students consistently withheld spoken participation - even when teachers judged them to understand the material - points to a challenge that extends well beyond ordinary language anxiety. What the data reveal is a pattern of protective social withdrawal: speaking in English publicly carries a perceived social cost that, in the judgement of most students, outweighs the potential benefit of participation. This is not simply a matter of ability. S1's visceral physical description of anticipated speaking - cold hands, a racing heart, a deliberate choice to remain invisible - suggests that the barrier is primarily affective and social rather than linguistic. The markedly higher participation these same students showed in pair and small-group settings further suggests that their communicative capacity was not absent, only inhibited under whole-class performance conditions.

This pattern aligns closely with what Hussain et al. (2025) describe as foreign language anxiety - a multidimensional construct encompassing feelings of tension, apprehension, and self-consciousness associated with language performance. In their framework, anxious learners typically avoid speaking, seek opportunities to remain unnoticed, and experience memory interference under pressure, all of which are present in this study's data. S3's account of forgetting a memorized introduction the moment he stood before his peers is a textbook manifestation of anxiety-induced retrieval failure. Similarly, Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) argue that language anxiety directly reduces learners' willingness to communicate, and that this effect is particularly pronounced when performance is public and evaluative. In the *pesantren* context, the evaluative dimension appears doubly weighted: students are not only judged by the teacher but also by peers whose opinion holds significant social value within a tight-knit residential community.

What makes this finding contextually specific, however, is the social amplification mechanism. When a mispronounced word drew classroom laughter - as T1 documented (T1/TI-D3; Senin, 4 Mei 2026; att3) - the affective consequences extended beyond the individual student to

suppress risk-taking across the entire group. This peer-driven inhibition cycle has been noted in broader EFL literature: Dita et al. (2026) identified negative peer evaluation as among the most significant psychological barriers to oral participation in Indonesian *pesantren* classrooms, and Sari (2023) similarly found that fear of embarrassment in front of classmates constrained communicative engagement in boarding school EFL contexts. The present study confirms and extends these findings through observational detail, showing not only that the cycle exists but that its effects are visible moment by moment - in the lowered heads, the near-inaudible voices, and the gradual reduction in volunteers following a single episode of classroom laughter.

Pronunciation Difficulties and Phonological Confusion

The pronunciation challenge documented in this study reflects a well-established structural difficulty in EFL contexts: the discontinuity between English orthography and phonology. However, its consequences in this *pesantren* setting appear more acute than they might be elsewhere, for two interconnected reasons.

First, as Harmer (2015) notes, learners in EFL contexts tend to depend heavily on the teacher's modeled pronunciation because authentic audio input from native or proficient speakers is rarely accessible outside the classroom. In this study, that dependence was compounded by the complete unavailability of functional audio equipment across all three (T1/OBS-B31; Senin, 4 Mei 2026; att4). sessions. Nation & Nation (2001) emphasizes that language acquisition depends on sufficient and varied exposure to phonological input, and that classroom activities constitute the primary - sometimes only - source of such input in formal EFL environments where outside exposure is minimal. When even classroom audio technology is absent, the gap in phonological input becomes structural rather than incidental. Students who cannot hear diverse models of English pronunciation have no reliable framework for self-correction, which perpetuates the very confusion that makes public speaking feel so risky.

Second, the social dimension of pronunciation error in this setting operates as a distinct additional barrier. T1's documented observation - that one student's mispronunciation triggered classroom laughter, which in turn discouraged subsequent attempts (T1/TI-D3; Senin, 4 Mei 2026; att3) - illustrates how phonological difficulty and social anxiety feed each other in a self-reinforcing cycle. Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) argue that the social environment of the classroom is itself a motivational variable; when errors are met with laughter rather than encouragement, the classroom ceases to function as a safe space for linguistic experimentation. This finding resonates with T3's observation that students routinely attempted word-for-word transliteration from Indonesian, producing phonological forms that are internally consistent with their first language but diverge from English targets (T3/TI-D3; Rabu, 6 Mei 2026; att3). Nation & Nation (2001) and Harmer (2015) both suggest that this kind of interference from the first language's phonological system is predictable in EFL settings; what the present data add is that the *pesantren* environment provides fewer corrective inputs and more social inhibitors than most EFL classrooms, making this a harder challenge to address here than in general school contexts.

Limited Instructional Resources and Technology Constraints

The consistent absence of functional teaching technology across all three sessions is not merely an infrastructural inconvenience - it represents a structural limitation that compounds multiple other challenges simultaneously. As Widodo (2022) observes, teachers in culturally specific educational settings must continuously negotiate between pedagogical ideals and contextual realities; in this *pesantren*, resource constraints are among the most persistent of those realities.

The finding that all three lesson plans formally listed media while none incorporated digital alternatives or contingency provisions suggests that this gap was anticipated and normalized - a routine condition rather than an inconsistency (RPP-T1; att5), (RPP-T2; att5), (RPP-T3; att5).

The cascading effects of this constraint are worth tracing carefully. Without audio equipment, pronunciation modelling depends entirely on teacher voice - a single, potentially limited phonological model. Without LCD projectors, vocabulary instruction relies on blackboard illustration, limiting the richness and variety of visual input available to learners. Without access to interactive digital activities, the range of motivational strategies available to teachers narrows considerably. Kusuma (2022) identified limited instructional resources as among the most frequently cited obstacles in Indonesian EFL contexts, and Widodo (2022) specifically noted that resource constraints in religious schools tend to be intensified by institutional restrictions on technology access. The present study confirms both observations and adds a further layer: the prohibition on student mobile phones removes even the informal acquisition channel that students in non-residential schools might access through music, social media, or video content. In effect, *pesantren* students face a double insulation from English-language media - one imposed institutionally through the no-phone rule, and one imposed infrastructurally through malfunctioning classroom technology.

Time Constraints and Competing Institutional Demands

The time challenge documented here operates on two distinct levels that must be analytically separated to be fully understood. The first is structural: English receives a limited weekly allocation within the formal curriculum, insufficient for developing speaking fluency, which - as T1 correctly observed (T1/TI-D9; Senin, 4 Mei 2026; att3) - requires sustained, continuous practice rather than intermittent exposure. The second level is physiological: students arrive in English class already depleted by the cumulative demands of a residential schedule that begins before dawn and extends late into the evening. These are not equivalent problems, and conflating them risks missing the more contextually specific of the two.

Sari (2023) acknowledged time constraints as a recurring challenge in *pesantren* EFL contexts, focusing primarily on curriculum allocation. The present study extends this analysis by documenting the fatigue dimension - teachers' adaptive decisions to shift toward more receptive tasks on days when student energy was visibly low. T1 and T3 both described reading student conditions before deciding how to structure a session, session (T3/TI-D6; Rabu, 6 Mei 2026; att3), which represents a form of contextual responsiveness that goes beyond standard pedagogical planning. From a theoretical standpoint, this resonates with what Farrell (2018) describes as teacher adaptation: the ongoing modification of instructional practices in response to learners' immediate states, not only their long-term proficiency needs. The fact that all three teachers engaged in this real-time adjustment spontaneously - without formal protocol or training for it - is itself a meaningful finding about how professional coping operates in this setting.

Heterogeneous Student Proficiency Levels

The variation in students' baseline proficiency observed in this study is a well-documented characteristic of EFL classrooms generally, but it takes on a particular shape in this *pesantren* context. Unlike in general schools where prior learning trajectories are more uniformly shaped by the national curriculum, *pesantren* students enter with widely varying backgrounds - from students like S2 who had three years of private English conversation training, to students like S1 and S3 who had only minimal prior exposure. This variation is not randomly distributed; it

tends to correlate with whether students came from urban or rural backgrounds and whether their families had the economic means to provide supplementary language education.

Nation & Nation (2001) notes that heterogeneous proficiency in EFL classrooms makes it difficult to design instruction that is simultaneously appropriate and challenging for all learners. T1's response - forming mixed-ability groups with peer learning arrangements (T1/TI-D10; Senin, 4 Mei 2026; att3) - is consistent with what Richards and Rodgers (2014) identify as a practical strategy for managing proficiency diversity, and what Farrell (2018) describes as differentiated instruction. This differentiated intention is documented not only in interview data but also in the teachers' lesson plans themselves, both of which build in graduated support for less confident or less proficient students (RPP-T2; att5), (RPP-T3; att5). T2 similarly noted that students tended to be more comfortable receiving explanations from knowledgeable peers than from the teacher directly - a dynamic that is particularly salient in the *pesantren* relational culture, where the intimacy of dormitory life appears to create peer learning networks that function informally and effectively.

Cultural Challenges Faced by EFL Teachers

Adab Culture and Its Restrictive Effect on Classroom Participation

The influence of *adab pesantren* on classroom participation is among the most contextually specific findings of this study, and it requires interpretation that goes beyond standard accounts of shyness or cultural modesty in EFL classrooms. What the data reveal is not simply that students are timid, but that their behavioural restraint in communicative tasks reflects a coherent and deeply socialized mode of self-presentation that has been formed through years of residential religious life. In *pesantren* culture, refraining from speaking confidently and prominently before a group - especially in front of peers, and especially unsolicited - is not a failure of confidence but an expression of *adab*: a valued comportment that signals humility, respect, and deference to collective norms. When communicative language teaching asks these students to initiate, argue, and perform, it is asking them to temporarily inhabit a behavioural style that their formation has taught them to associate with immodesty or self-aggrandizement.

This interpretation aligns with Setyawan and Muin's (2024) analysis of how *adab* culture shapes EFL participation in *pesantren* contexts, where they found that the communicative norms of English teaching frequently collided with the deeply internalized behavioural expectations of *santri* life. Rahmadi and Hamdan (2023) similarly documented those cultural norms of restraint and deference to authority in Islamic educational settings reduced students' willingness to engage in open communicative activities.

The Ideological Positioning of English as Secondary Knowledge

The finding that English tends to be perceived as subordinate to religious knowledge in this *pesantren* reflects a language ideology that is institutionally embedded rather than merely individually held. As Setyawan and Muin (2024) note, language ideology in *pesantren* contexts operates as a collective belief system about which languages carry value, for what purposes, and within whose worldview. In a *Salafiyah* institution whose educational priorities centre on the study of Islamic knowledge and moral development - as Azra (2019) describes - Arabic is not merely a language of instruction - it is the language of divine revelation, classical scholarship, and daily worship. Against this backdrop, English occupies a fundamentally different symbolic position: it is a language of the contemporary world, frequently associated with Western cultural production, and not embedded in any of the religious practices that structure *santri* life. S3's candid statement that religious knowledge is more important than

English (S3/SI-C20; Selasa, 5 Mei 2026; att3) is not an expression of anti-intellectualism; it is a coherent reflection of the value hierarchy his institution has cultivated in him.

Cultural Content Friction in Teaching Materials

The finding that standard EFL materials periodically contained content perceived as culturally or religiously incompatible with *pesantren* values - and that teachers engaged in systematic filtering and adaptation as a result (T3/TI-E1; Rabu, 6 Mei 2026; att3), (T2/TI-F5; Kamis, 7 Mei 2026; att3) - reflects a dimension of the teaching role that receives insufficient attention in mainstream ELT literature. Rahmawati et al. (2024) argue that material adaptation in *pesantren* EFL settings is not merely a sensitivity measure but a pedagogical necessity: without it, value dissonance between the materials and the learners' framework can generate resistance that undermines the entire instructional interaction. The cases documented here - Valentine's Day cards (S3/SI-E40; Selasa, 5 Mei 2026; att3), Halloween references (S2/SI-E40; Selasa, 5 Mei 2026; att3), immodest illustrations (T2/TI-F5; Kamis, 7 Mei 2026; att3) - represent exactly the kind of friction that Galloway and Rose (2021) describe as emerging when global English content enters locally value-governed classrooms. Teachers in this study did not simply remove offending content; they actively reconstructed tasks around Islamically appropriate alternatives, transforming a potential point of resistance into a point of relevance.

Absence of an English-Supporting Environment Outside the Classroom

The finding that English effectively ceases to exist as a living communicative presence outside the formal classroom - because students have no devices, no formal English-use policy, and no English-ambient social context - has implications that extend beyond simple exposure deficit. When a language is encountered only in institutional settings, it tends to be perceived as an institutional artifact rather than a living communicative tool. S1's observation that English is forgotten faster than Arabic because it is never used in daily life (S1/SI-E44; Selasa, 5 Mei 2026; att3) reflects a basic principle of retention: language that is not used decays. Nation & Nation (2001) is explicit on this point, noting that vocabulary development requires multiple exposures across varied contexts; when all exposures are confined to a single weekly lesson, acquisition is structurally impeded regardless of teaching quality.

Madkur and As'ad (2021) identified this environmental limitation as a defining characteristic of *pesantren* EFL contexts, and Widodo (2022) noted that the absence of English in the social environment places disproportionate responsibility on classroom instruction to compensate.

Reasons for the Emergence of Challenges Occur in the *Salafiyah* Islamic Boarding School in Kendal

The preceding discussion has touched on explanatory factors throughout, but this section draws them together into a more explicitly contextual account of why these challenges appear to be structurally reproduced in this particular institutional setting. Three intersecting factors deserve focused discussion.

Institutional Priority Rooted in the *pesantren* 's Founding Purpose

The most fundamental explanation for the cluster of challenges documented in this study is that *Pesantren Salafiyah* was not designed with English language acquisition as a priority, and its institutional architecture - curriculum allocation, schedule structure, resource distribution, and cultural emphasis - reflects this founding purpose consistently. As Azra (2019) explains, traditional *pesantren* education is organized around the cultivation of Islamic knowledge and moral formation as its primary objectives; general subjects, including English, occupy a supplementary position that follows from and is bounded by this priority. The consequence,

visible in the data, is that English teaching operates within structural conditions - limited time, constrained resources, a student body whose primary motivation for attendance is religious development - that are difficult for individual teachers to overcome regardless of their professional competence or commitment.

This should not be read as institutional negligence. Rather, it reflects what might be called institutional coherence: the *pesantren* 's design is internally consistent with its stated purpose. The challenge for EFL teachers is that they are expected to achieve communicative language outcomes within an institution whose architecture was built for a different educational purpose. Widodo (2022) describes this as a common condition for teachers in culturally specific contexts, where pedagogical ideals must be continuously negotiated against contextual realities. What the present study adds is specificity about how that negotiation plays out in practice: teachers adapt, improvise, and absorb the structural limitations as part of their professional responsibility, without institutional scaffolding designed to support them in doing so.

The Legacy of Traditional Pedagogical Practice (Bandongan and Sorogan)

The passivity that teachers observed in communicative activities - the preference for listening over speaking, the discomfort with peer debate, the tendency to wait for teacher guidance before responding - cannot be fully explained by anxiety or cultural modesty alone. A deeper structural explanation lies in the pedagogical formation that *pesantren* students undergo through traditional learning methods. In *bandongan* and *sorogan* systems, the teacher transmits knowledge and the student receives it; participation means attentiveness and accurate repetition, not spontaneous production or critical contribution. Students who have been formed in this tradition for years carry it as an internalized expectation about what learning looks, sounds, and feels like.

When communicative language teaching asks these students to initiate interaction, debate an argument, or produce language spontaneously in response to a classmate, it is not merely asking them to do something linguistically difficult. It is asking them to perform a mode of intellectual engagement that is structurally unfamiliar and culturally unchoreographed within their primary educational framework. Richards and Rodgers (2014) note that student-centered communicative approaches require learners who are already habituated to active participation - a condition that the *bandongan* tradition does not produce. T1's recognition of this dynamic, expressed in her observation that students were accustomed to listening and receiving rather than producing and debating, debating (T1/TI-D1; Senin, 4 Mei 2026; att3), demonstrates a sophisticated contextual understanding of why CLT faces particular resistance here that goes beyond standard cross-cultural EFL challenges.

Lantolf and Thorne (2006) argue within sociocultural theory that learners' educational histories shape not only what they know but how they expect to learn - what they consider appropriate classroom behaviour, what counts as demonstrating understanding, and what participation means. The passive orientations observed in this study are not obstacles to be removed but historically formed dispositions to be gently and respectfully redirected. This requires pedagogical patience and an understanding of where students' behavioural patterns come from - qualities that the three teachers in this study appeared to possess through experience and cultural familiarity, even without formal training in this area.

Environmental Insulation from English

The third structural reason - the near-total absence of English from students' daily living environment - has been discussed in Section B.1, but its systemic character warrants additional

emphasis here. Unlike most EFL challenges, which can theoretically be addressed through better teaching within the classroom, the environmental insulation from English cannot be resolved by instructional improvement alone. It is a condition of the institutional environment that persists across all lessons, all teachers, and all grade levels. Nation & Nation (2001) and Harmer (2015) both argue that meaningful language development requires exposure that extends beyond classroom instruction; when that extended exposure is structurally prevented - by device prohibitions, by the absence of English-language media, and by a social environment that operates entirely in other languages - the gap between what theory prescribes and what the institution enables becomes a systemic one.

Heriyawati & Istiyani (2026) found in her study of *pesantren* EFL contexts that learner autonomy required sustained institutional support to develop; the present study suggests that the very preconditions for such autonomy - access to English outside class, informal practice opportunities, motivational reinforcement through environmental exposure - are absent in this setting. This is not a critique of the institution's values but an honest assessment of the structural conditions within which English learning is expected to occur. Addressing it will require institutional decisions, not only pedagogical ones.

EFL Teachers' Strategies for Coping with the Challenges

Contextualizing Materials Within *pesantren* Life

The most consistently documented coping strategy - deliberate alignment of instructional content with the daily realities of *pesantren* life - is more than a motivational technique. It represents a fundamentally different conception of what English teaching means in this context. Rather than teaching English as a window onto an external world, these teachers taught English as a lens through which students could articulate and reflect on the world they already inhabit. This distinction matters because it repositions English from a culturally foreign subject to a communicative resource with immediate relevance to students' lives.

Rachmawati and Cahyono (2021) documented precisely this effect in their study of contextualized English teaching in Indonesian settings, finding that materials reflecting students' daily realities produced higher participation and better comprehension than generic EFL content. Gay (2018) similarly argues that culturally responsive teaching is not merely an accommodation strategy but a fundamental approach to making learning both meaningful and accessible - and that meaning and accessibility are prerequisites for engagement rather than rewards for it. The observational evidence in this study is consistent with these claims: tasks anchored in *pesantren* routines - the dormitory map, the tea-making procedure, the handphone-versus-book debate - generated visibly higher and more sustained student involvement than content-neutral activities (T2/OBS-B03; Rabu, 6 Mei 2026; att4). This suggests that the teachers' intuitive contextualization strategy was not only pragmatically effective but theoretically grounded, even if its grounding was not formally articulated.

From a sociocultural perspective (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006), this strategy is also sound: learning is most effectively mediated through tools and contexts that are already meaningful within the learner's cultural world. By making the *pesantren* itself the content domain of English instruction, teachers created what might be described as a culturally coherent learning space - one in which the language and the life of the learner are not in tension but in productive dialogue.

During the instructional session, the teacher intentionally bridged the gap between abstract linguistic frameworks and real-world applications by grounding the concept of procedural text in the familiar, everyday routines of making tea and operating a water dispenser (OBS-B03,

T2). Rather than presenting structural rules in isolation, the teacher systematically dissected the chronological sequence of making tea, which required students to identify power indicators and differentiate between color-coded temperature levers (OBS-B03, T2).

Scaffolded Speaking Practice in Low-Visibility Formats

The strategy of beginning oral tasks in pair work or small groups before progressing to whole-class interaction is standard scaffolding practice in EFL pedagogy. What makes it particularly effective in this context, however, is not its cognitive function - reducing task complexity - but its social function: reducing the visibility of individual performance, and thereby lowering the cultural cost of participation. This distinction is important because it suggests that the teachers' use of graduated exposure was responding to a social and cultural reality, not only a linguistic one.

Harmer (2015) describes scaffolding as enabling learners to perform tasks beyond their current level through guided support that is gradually reduced. In this study, the more significant scaffolding function appears to be social: within a pair, a pronunciation error is heard only by one trusted peer rather than broadcast to the class; within a small group, an incomplete sentence is negotiated collectively rather than individually evaluated. This social scaffolding directly addresses the *adab* culture barrier documented in Section A, by creating participation formats that are compatible with students' culturally formed sense of appropriate self-presentation (T2/OBS-D01; Rabu, 6 Mei 2026; att4). Farrell's (2018) account of teacher adaptation emphasizes that effective teachers continuously modify practices in response to both linguistic and contextual demands; the graduated exposure strategy observed here represents precisely this kind of context-sensitive responsiveness.

The observation that dormitory peer-learning sessions - spontaneous, informal, horizontally organized - produced some of the most confident spoken English behaviour reported in this study (as S2's account suggests (S2/SI-F50; Selasa, 5 Mei 2026; att3)) further illuminates the power of low-visibility formats. When performance is observed only by intimates, the social cost of imperfection disappears almost entirely. This informal finding carries a practical implication: the most enabling conditions for English speaking development in this *pesantren* may not be the formal classroom at all, but the relational spaces students already inhabit — if those spaces can be given structured communicative purpose.

Integrating Islamic Values into Language Tasks

The strategy of embedding Islamic content within English language tasks - using Prophetic stories for role-play, Islamic figures for reading texts, santri daily routines for speaking activities (T1/TI-F6; Senin, 4 Mei 2026; att3), (RPP-T2; att5), (RPP-T3; att5) - addresses the language ideology challenge at its motivational root. By demonstrating that English can be a medium through which Islamic knowledge is expressed, accessed, and shared, teachers reframe the language from a symbol of cultural otherness to a potential instrument of Islamic purpose.

Madkur and As'ad (2021) found in their study of *pesantren* EFL contexts that aligning English tasks with students' religious and cultural contexts measurably improved acceptance and engagement. Kurniasih & Turmudi (2025) similarly showed that integrating Islamic themes into reading instruction strengthened motivation and supported better comprehension. The present study confirms and extends these findings through the student data, which make the motivational mechanism visible at the individual level. S3's account of his attitude shift - from indifference to conditional investment - following a teacher's explicit connection between English proficiency and *dakwah* effectiveness (S3/SI-F53; Selasa, 5 Mei 2026; att3) illustrates

precisely how this strategy operates: it does not change the language task, but it changes the story students tell themselves about why the task matters.

Flexible Translingual Practice

The flexible movement between English, Indonesian, Javanese, and Arabic documented across all three classrooms reflects a pragmatic response to a fundamental tension in EFL pedagogy: the competing demands of maximizing English exposure on one hand and ensuring comprehension on the other. T2's explicit reasoning - that comprehensible mixed-language instruction is preferable to incomprehensible English-only instruction (T2/TI-F4; Kamis, 7 Mei 2026; att3) - aligns with what García and Wei (2014) describe as translanguaging: the strategic and flexible deployment of a learner's full linguistic repertoire to support meaning-making and participation. Translanguaging, in their framework, is not a compromise of target language learning but a recognition that bilinguals and multilinguals do not operate in linguistically segregated modes; allowing students to draw on all their languages simultaneously can actually accelerate comprehension and reduce the anxiety associated with single-language performance demands.

In the *pesantren* context, this strategy carries an additional cultural dimension. As T2 noted, Arabic already carries prestige as the language of Islamic scholarship; enforcing strict English-only instruction could inadvertently signal that English is being prioritized over Arabic - an implication that could generate resistance from both students and institution. The multilingual classroom that teachers in this study maintained - English for target language modeling and practice, Indonesian for explanation and management, Javanese and Arabic for cultural connection - operates as a culturally inclusive space in which English is present without displacing or devaluing the other languages that give the *pesantren* community its identity.

Affective Encouragement as a Deliberate Pedagogical Strategy

The systematic use of verbal affirmation *good job! nice try!*, moving physically toward hesitant students, maintaining patient and respectful tone - may appear to be ordinary good teaching, but in this *pesantren* context it carries weight that goes beyond routine encouragement. Given the hierarchical nature of the teacher-student relationship in *pesantren* culture - where teachers are invested with considerable authority and students are deeply habituated to deferring to their judgment - a teacher's explicit public affirmation of a student's communicative attempt performs a culturally distinctive function. It constitutes public authorization for imperfect performance, transforming the meaning of error from something to be avoided into something that is acknowledged, valued, and welcomed. In a setting where making mistakes in front of peers carries significant social cost, the teacher's affirmation provides a counterweight that, when trusted, can shift the social calculus of participation.

Students' Responses to English Language Teaching Practices

Higher Engagement in Small-Group and Pair Work Formats

The consistent preference for small-group and pair work interaction across all three student participants, confirmed by observational data from all three classrooms (T1/OBS-D01; Senin, 4 Mei 2026; att4), (T2/OBS-D01; Rabu, 6 Mei 2026; att4), (T3/OBS-D01; Kamis, 7 Mei 2026; att4), is among the most practically actionable findings of this study. Fredricks et al. (2004) define student engagement as a multi-dimensional construct encompassing behavioural participation, emotional investment, and cognitive effort; what the data reveal is that all three dimensions of engagement shift significantly according to the social arrangement of the task, not primarily its linguistic content. Students who appeared disengaged or passive in whole-

class settings were observably more active, more fluent, and more willing to sustain interaction in small-group formats.

This pattern is best understood not as evidence that students are generally unmotivated, but as evidence that their motivation is context-sensitive in a way that reflects the *adab* culture of their institution. The intimacy of dormitory life - sharing sleeping spaces, meals, and daily activities over years - creates a peer relational culture of unusual depth and trust. Within this relational framework, small-group tasks carry a social safety that whole-class performance simply does not. Rachmawati and Cahyono (2021) found that students in Indonesian EFL contexts demonstrated higher participation when tasks were designed around familiar and low-stakes formats; in the *pesantren* setting, familiarity of format appears to matter as much as familiarity of content.

Variation in Response Based on Prior Exposure and Personal Purpose

The three student profiles documented in this study - S2's confident engagement rooted in prior training and clear personal purpose; S1's gradual, anxiety-mediated growth from minimal foundations; S3's selective, instrumentally driven investment - illustrate a dimension of student response that aggregate data cannot capture. Fakhruddin (2021) found that students in *pesantren* contexts tend toward instrumental motivation, valuing English for its utility in achieving future goals rather than for intrinsic interest in the language. The present data both confirm and complicate this finding: S3's instrumental motivation is strong but narrow, extending primarily to *dakwah* applications and remaining disengaged from English for other purposes (S3/SI-C23; Selasa, 5 Mei 2026; att3); S2's motivation has developed beyond mere instrumentality into a more integrated identity investment, shaped partly by her prior learning history; S1's motivation is cautious and conditional, growing primarily through specific positive relational experiences with her teacher.

Incremental Confidence Through Specific Positive Experiences

The finding that all three student participants attributed meaningful growth to specific, emotionally memorable moments - a teacher's *good job!* a reframing of English's purpose, a successful answer remembered years later - carries important implications for how confidence development should be understood in this context. The standard assumption in EFL pedagogy is that confidence grows cumulatively through practice: the more students speak, the more confident they become. The present data suggest a different, more episodic mechanism: in a context where public performance carries high social risk and where most practice opportunities produce anxiety rather than satisfaction, cumulative exposure may not function as the primary driver of confidence. Instead, confidence appears to develop through specific experiences that redefine the student's relationship to the language - moments that are relational rather than merely instructional in nature.

Evolving Perceptions of English's Relevance

The emerging recognition among all three student participants that English could serve purposes they already valued - art teaching, international *dakwah*, global Islamic outreach - represents a meaningful if incomplete shift in the language ideology documented in the challenges section. This evolution is not spontaneous; it is the cumulative product of teachers deliberate reframing strategies, students' own developing awareness of global educational and religious opportunity, and the ongoing influence of a broader cultural shift in how Indonesian *pesantren* communities are beginning to position themselves in relation to the global stage.

Fachrizza et al. (2025) documented that students' perception of English's relevance is a critical predictor of motivation in Islamic educational institutions; the present data suggest that this perception is dynamic and educable rather than fixed. S2's fully developed aspiration - to carry Islamic values to a wider global audience through English (S2/SI-E48; Selasa, 5 Mei 2026; att3)- represents the motivational endpoint that effective EFL instruction in this setting might reasonably aim toward. Importantly, it does not require students to abandon their religious identity in favour of global citizenship; rather, it allows them to see these two identities as mutually reinforcing, with English serving as the bridge between them.

The findings reveal several pedagogical and cultural challenges in teaching English at the Salafiyah Islamic boarding school. These challenges include students' low confidence in speaking English, pronunciation difficulties, limited technological facilities, time constraints, differences in English proficiency, and the influence of pesantren culture. In this context, English learning takes place alongside religious education, which remains the primary focus of students' daily activities.

One of the challenges identified was students' limited confidence in participating in oral activities. Some students were hesitant to speak English because they were concerned about making mistakes, particularly in pronunciation. This hesitation affected their participation in classroom discussions and speaking activities. The findings suggest that students' reluctance was not necessarily a lack of interest in learning English but could also be related to their confidence and familiarity with using the language.

The pesantren environment also shaped students' communication practices. The emphasis on etiquette (*adab*) influenced how students interacted with teachers and peers during classroom activities. Students tended to maintain respectful communication and avoid behavior they considered inappropriate. However, the relationship between *adab* and students' participation in English learning should be understood cautiously. The findings indicate that pesantren values formed part of the learning context, but they do not establish that *adab* directly determined students' speaking behavior.

Differences in students' English proficiency presented another challenge. Students had varying levels of vocabulary knowledge, pronunciation skills, and confidence. These differences influenced how they responded to classroom tasks and how much support they required. In such circumstances, teaching strategies needed to accommodate students with different learning needs rather than assume that all students could participate at the same level.

Limited technological facilities also affected the teaching and learning process. The use of technology was constrained by the available resources, requiring teachers to rely on alternative materials and classroom-based activities. This finding highlights the importance of adapting instructional practices to the conditions of the pesantren rather than depending on technology as the primary means of delivering English instruction.

Time constraints and students' daily routines also influenced English learning. As students participated in various religious and boarding school activities, the time available for English instruction and practice was limited. These conditions could affect opportunities for repeated language exposure and speaking practice. The findings therefore indicate that English learning was shaped not only by classroom instruction but also by the broader schedule and priorities of the pesantren.

Cultural differences between instructional materials and students' experiences also emerged as a consideration. Some English materials contained contexts that were not fully aligned with the students' cultural and religious backgrounds. This situation required teachers to select or adapt

examples so that the materials remained understandable and relevant. The findings suggest that contextualization helped connect English learning with students' everyday experiences and the values emphasized in the pesantren.

To address these challenges, teachers used several instructional strategies. One strategy involved contextualizing English materials by connecting lesson content with familiar objects, activities, and situations. For example, one teacher used a procedural text about making tea or using a water dispenser to introduce language structures and vocabulary. Such examples provided students with recognizable contexts for understanding English texts and practicing language use.

Teachers also applied scaffolding in speaking activities. Students were given support through structured tasks and opportunities to practice in smaller groups. In one observed activity, students worked in groups of four. This arrangement provided a setting in which students could practice English with their peers before or while participating in broader classroom activities. In the pesantren context, small-group work should be considered in relation to students' confidence, peer interaction, and classroom norms, rather than treated solely as a general EFL technique.

Another strategy was the integration of Islamic values into English instruction. Teachers incorporated contexts and examples that were compatible with the students' religious and cultural environment. This approach allowed English learning to take place without separating it entirely from the values and routines of the pesantren. The findings demonstrate how teachers considered the local educational context when selecting and presenting instructional content.

Teachers also allowed flexible language use during classroom interaction. Students could use Indonesian or other familiar language resources when they experienced difficulty expressing ideas in English. This practice helped maintain communication and supported students in understanding instructions and completing tasks. However, the use of multiple languages should be interpreted as a classroom practice observed in this study, not as evidence that a particular language approach was systematically implemented.

Affective encouragement was another strategy used by teachers. Teachers encouraged students to participate and supported them when they experienced difficulties. This encouragement was relevant to students who lacked confidence or were hesitant to speak English. The findings indicate that teacher support formed part of the classroom environment and may have helped students engage in learning activities, although the available data do not establish a direct causal effect on students' confidence or achievement.

The findings can be discussed in relation to previous studies on EFL instruction, learner confidence, scaffolding, and contextualized learning. The challenges associated with speaking confidence and pronunciation are consistent with research highlighting affective and linguistic barriers in foreign language learning. However, this study adds contextual detail by showing how these challenges appeared within a Salafiyah pesantren, where students' learning experiences were also shaped by religious routines, etiquette, and the priority given to religious education.

Similarly, the use of small-group activities and scaffolding reflects instructional practices commonly discussed in EFL research. In this study, however, these practices took place within a specific institutional and cultural setting. The group arrangement and teacher support should therefore be interpreted in relation to the observed classroom conditions, including students' varying proficiency and confidence, rather than assumed to produce the same outcomes reported in other educational contexts.

The use of contextualized materials and Islamic values also provides a point of comparison with studies emphasizing culturally responsive teaching. The findings show that teachers adapted examples to make English content more familiar and compatible with the *pesantren* environment. This extends the discussion by illustrating how cultural and religious considerations were incorporated into everyday instructional decisions. Nevertheless, the findings do not establish that such adaptations were universally effective or that they necessarily improved learning outcomes.

Conclusion

Pedagogical and Cultural Challenges Faced by EFL Teachers

Pedagogical and cultural challenges faced by EFL teachers at *Pesantren Salafiyah* consist of two closely intertwined dimensions rather than two separate problems. Pedagogically, teachers contended with students' reluctance to speak for fear of making mistakes, persistent pronunciation difficulties rooted in the mismatch between English spelling and sound, limited instructional resources compounded by non-functioning classroom technology, insufficient instructional time made worse by students' physical fatigue from the dense *pesantren* schedule, and considerable variation in students' baseline English proficiency. These pedagogical difficulties do not exist independently of the *pesantren*'s cultural fabric; rather, they are shaped and reinforced by it. The *adab* culture that discourages conspicuous self-expression makes silence in the classroom a matter of propriety rather than incapacity. The ideological positioning of English as secondary to religious knowledge, particularly Arabic, lowers the perceived stakes of learning it well. Recurring friction between globally circulating EFL materials and Islamic values requires teachers to constantly filter and adapt what they teach. And the near-total absence of an English-supportive environment outside the classroom - a consequence of restrictions on personal devices and the dominance of Indonesian, Javanese, and Arabic in daily *pesantren* life - leaves English with almost nowhere to live beyond the weekly lesson.

Reasons Why These Challenges Occur

These pedagogical and cultural challenges are not incidental; they are structurally produced by the *pesantren*'s own institutional design. Three reasons underlie their persistence. First, *Pesantren Salafiyah* was founded to cultivate Islamic knowledge and moral formation, not general academic competency, so English occupies a supplementary position within an architecture - curriculum time, resource allocation, cultural emphasis - built for a different purpose entirely. Second, the legacy of traditional pedagogical practice, particularly *bandongan* and *sorogan*, has formed students to expect learning as reception rather than production, making the spontaneous, initiative-taking behaviour that communicative English teaching requires feel culturally unfamiliar. Third, the environmental insulation of *pesantren* life - the absence of personal devices, of English-language media, and of any English-speaking social space - means that whatever exposure students receive is confined almost entirely to a single classroom hour each week. Taken together, these three conditions explain why the challenges identified above are so resistant to change through classroom-level effort alone.

EFL Teachers' Coping Strategies

Faced with these structurally embedded obstacles, the three teachers in this study did not wait for institutional conditions to improve; they developed contextually intelligent coping strategies of their own. They grounded materials in the rhythms of *santri* life - dormitory routines, mosque directions, daily chores - so that English became a lens on students' own world rather than a foreign import. They scaffolded speaking tasks from low- to higher-

visibility formats, allowing students to build confidence in pairs and small groups before facing the whole class. They integrated Islamic content into language tasks, reframing English as an instrument capable of carrying religious purpose rather than displacing it. They moved flexibly between English, Indonesian, Javanese, and Arabic to preserve comprehension without abandoning the target language altogether. And they sustained affective encouragement as a deliberate pedagogical act, treating a teacher's simple "good job" as a culturally significant form of authorization for imperfect performance. These strategies were not drawn from formal training; they emerged from the teachers' own lived familiarity with *pesantren* culture, which gave their adaptations a credibility that a generic communicative approach could not have achieved on its own.

Students' Responses to English Language Teaching Practices

The effect of these strategies is visible in how students responded. Students participated most actively when instructional formats reduced social visibility and aligned with the relational norms of *pesantren* life, engaging far more openly in pair and small-group work than in whole-class performance. Their responses varied considerably depending on prior exposure and personal purpose, from confident, internationally minded engagement to cautious, anxiety-mediated growth to selective, instrumentally driven interest. Confidence, where it appeared, tended to develop not gradually through repeated practice but suddenly, through specific, emotionally memorable moments of encouragement or reframing. And several students articulated an evolving, if still fragile, sense of English's relevance to their futures - particularly once teachers explicitly connected language competence to dakwah and global educational opportunity, a connection that transformed English from a subject to be endured into a tool worth investing in.

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