

Integration of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) in English Teaching at Bangsri Islamic Boarding School

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ABSTRACT

English language teaching in Islamic boarding schools must integrate intercultural communication to prepare students for global interactions while preserving their cultural and religious identity. Research on Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) in faith-based and rural contexts remains limited. Therefore, this study examines the integration of ICC in English Language Teaching (ELT) at an Indonesian Islamic boarding school. Using a qualitative case study approach, data was collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, student journals, and document analysis. The research explored how teachers implemented ICC strategies, the challenges encountered, and students' perceptions. Findings revealed that teachers employed translanguaging, digital media, and linguistic-cultural interlinking to foster ICC, effectively bridging cultural gaps. Teachers showed high consistency in cultural discussions (mean observation score of 4.2/5.0). However, pronunciation difficulties, students' shyness, grammatical errors, and socio-cultural rivalries were found to hinder ICC development. While students demonstrated strong respect and politeness (self-assessment scores up to 4.5), their active participation and comfort in intercultural interactions remained only moderate (scores around 3.5). These results highlight the urgent need for context-sensitive pedagogical approaches, such as targeted pronunciation exercises and confidence-building activities to enhance ICC while respecting student values. This study contributes to understanding ICC in multilingual, faith-based contexts and offers practical insights for similar educational environments.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) has become a key competence in English Language Teaching (ELT) (Moeller & Faltin, 2022)(Lee & Mark, 2023; Moeller & Faltin, 2022). This shift is necessary because the global nature of English Communication demands more than just traditional linguistic mastery (Hua, 2018). ICC enables students to communicate effectively across cultural contexts by combining both linguistic and cultural proficiency (Deardorff, 2006; Sercu, Castro, & Garcia, 2021). Furthermore, Deardorff (2006) explained that ICC is not limited to the mastery of grammar and vocabulary, but also encompasses attitudes, knowledge, and skills necessary for meaningful intercultural interactions (Tuzlukova, Al-Issa, & Krawiec, 2020). In line with this view, Hua (2018) emphasized that, with the acceleration of globalization, language learning needs to integrate cultural awareness in order to enhance cross-cultural understanding (Baker & Clark, 2020). Similarly, Jiang et al., (2022) asserted that the development of ICC allowed learners to adapt to various socio-cultural contexts, making English learning more meaningful and applicable to real-life situations. Therefore, the implementation of ICC becomes increasingly relevant to be investigated in the context of faith-based education in Indonesia, particularly in *Pesantren*, where language learning is combined with religious values and local cultural traditions (Adelia & Zuchdi, 2022).

Within the Indonesian context, the implementation of ICC is particularly relevant in *Pesantren* (Islamic Boarding School), which represent multicultural environments where students navigate religious, local and global discourses simultaneously (Afriani, 2021; Hanafi & Setiyadi, 2021). The unique characteristic of *Pesantren* is the integration of ICC, which plays a significant role in helping students apply language skills across religious and secular domains (Fauzi & Anggun, 2023; Izzet & Utanto, 2017). In this context, *Pesantren* Bangsri offered a unique example of how a faith-based institution balanced Islamic scholarly traditions with the demands of global communication (Nurhayati, 2020). Designed to deepen students' understanding of Islamic texts, the methods at *Pesantren* Bangsri emphasized the simplicity of Arabic grammar and interpretation. However, the inclusion of English in the curriculum expanded the scope of communication beyond Islamic scholarship, encouraging students to navigate linguistic and cultural differences. While maintaining a strong commitment to Arabic proficiency, the institution also provided English programs that prepared students for global engagement, highlighting the importance of intercultural communication in contemporary Islamic education.

In addition, *Pesantren* provided a space to examine how traditional teaching methods interacted with the needs of modern intercultural communication (Birroh, Haryono, & Utanto, 2023). In practice, English was not taught merely as a linguistic skill but also as a means of connecting with global perspectives while remaining rooted in religious and cultural values (Masrur & Mutiah, 2021). Teachers in *Pesantren* deliberately designed learning experiences that reflected the spiritual ethos of the institution while addressing the demands of multicultural communication. The integration of cultural elements into the curriculum enabled students to engage with diverse perspectives without abandoning their grounding in Islamic values (Ariawan, Islam, & Mataram, 2024; Auladi & Bakhtiar, 2023; Ghufron, Taufiq, & Firdaus, 2024; Subekti, 2023). Thus, English learning in *Pesantren* underscored the necessity of intercultural awareness, culturally adaptive pedagogy, and bilingual practices that are rooted in Islamic traditions while simultaneously opening pathways to global engagement (Nofriani, 2022).

Despite the recognized importance of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) in English Language Teaching (ELT), a significant gap persists, particularly within the Indonesian *Pesantren* context. Many existing English programs still lack a structured intercultural training framework. This deficiency was problematic because language instruction often prioritizes grammatical accuracy and vocabulary mastery, while cultural competence was largely neglected (Kim, Li, & Lee, 2024). Consequently, students may achieve linguistic proficiency yet still struggle to communicate effectively across diverse cultures. Given that language learning in *Pesantren* is closely tied to religious and cultural values—where Arabic and English are learned simultaneously—proficiency must extend beyond linguistic rules to include an understanding of cross-cultural politeness norms that shape social

interaction. This exposure is crucial for equipping students to interact in global contexts without compromising their cultural and religious identities.

This lack of structured integration framework highlights the need for the present study. While several studies highlighted the necessity of integrating ICC into language education. Fielding (2021) emphasized the need for ELT curricula to incorporate cross-cultural materials directly, while Banks & Banks (2016) connected it to a multicultural education framework that fosters cultural awareness. Teachers played a central role in this process, as they were expected to design learning activities that encouraged cultural engagement and critical reflection (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). In multilingual and multicultural contexts, misunderstandings often occurred not because of weak language skills, but due to differences in cultural norms and interpretations (Ozer, 2020; Zhang, 2019). Therefore, culturally responsive language teaching becomes essential for helping students adapt to diverse communication styles.

The integration of intercultural content in ELT in *Pesantren* has the potential to strengthen students' awareness of cultural diversity and foster mutual respect. According to Jiang et al., (2022) even stressed that virtual exchange programs could directly enrich students' intercultural experiences. However, challenges arose when the *Pesantren* curriculum had to balance religious teachings with the demands of global communication. As observed in *Pesantren* Bangsri, the integration of religious and cultural values did promote a tolerant mindset, yet students still faced obstacles in adapting to different global communication norms.

Based on this background and the identified research gap, the present study aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the integration of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) in English teaching at Bangsri Islamic Boarding School. More specifically, this research seeks to answer three central Research Questions:

- 1) How do English teachers implement intercultural communication strategies in the classroom? This question seeks to explore the pedagogical methods and instructional practices used by educators to promote cultural awareness and engagement.
- 2) What challenges do teachers and students face in fostering intercultural communication in the ELT classroom? This inquiry aims to identify institutional, pedagogical, and cultural barriers that hinder the effective integration of ICC within the *Pesantren* context.
- 3) How do students perceive and respond to intercultural communication in English language learning? This question focuses on students' attitudes, awareness, and behavioral adjustments in relation to intercultural interaction.

Therefore, this research is expected to provide meaningful insights into how the integration of ICC in English Language Teaching can prepare students for global communication while simultaneously maintaining their cultural and religious identities. While prior studies have addressed ICC in secular and multicultural contexts, this research contributes a fresh perspective by exploring how ICC is practiced and perceived in a faith-based English Language Teaching environment.

2. METHODS

2.1. *Research Design and Approach*

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to examine the integration of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) in English language teaching (ELT) at Markazullughoh Darul Falah Amtsilati, an Islamic boarding school in Indonesia. According to Miles et al. (2014) qualitative research allowed for in-depth exploration of complex educational and social phenomena, making it highly suitable for investigating ICC practices in the context of Islamic boarding school-based ELT. Furthermore, Ozer (2020) emphasized that qualitative methodology was highly effective in analyzing intercultural learning, as it provided insights into the real experiences of both educators and students. Therefore, this methodological approach ensured a comprehensive understanding of how ICC was implemented and experienced within the faith-based ELT setting.

2.2. Participants and Location

The research was conducted at Markazullughoh Darul Falah Amtsilati, an Islamic boarding school in Indonesia. The participants were purposively selected based on their direct involvement in the ELT program. The participants included: one English teacher, who also served as the head of the school, and a total of 20 students from class Darusallam, who participated in the observations and reflective journals.

2.3. Data Collection Technique

The research data was obtained through four main methods, namely classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, and document analysis. Each method was designed to complement each other so as to provide a comprehensive picture of the implementation of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) in English language learning. According to Creswell (2012) the use of various data collection techniques allowed researchers to gain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study. Thus, as Hua (2018) emphasized, the combination of various data sources in intercultural language learning research increased the depth of interpretation and produced credible and context-sensitive findings.

Four English learning sessions, each lasting 30 minutes, were observed. The observations were conducted in class Darusallam with approximately 20 students. The researcher used an observation checklist adapted from Deardorff's (2006) ICC model. This instrument categorized observations into four main areas: Implementation by Teacher, Student Engagement, Teaching Strategies, and Linguistic/Cultural Adaptability. Crucially, the instrument employed a 5-point rating scale (1 = Not Observed | 2 = Rarely | 3 = Sometimes | 4 = Often | 5 = Always) to systematically quantify the frequency of ICC implementation across all indicators. During the observations, the researcher systematically took field notes to maintain data accuracy and consistency.

One semi-structured interview was conducted with the English teacher, who also served as the head of Markazullughoh Darul Falah Amtsilati. The interview lasted for approximately 45 minutes and followed a set of prepared guiding questions. The questions addressed teaching practices, challenges in implementing ICC, and the teacher's perspectives on intercultural communication in English language learning. The interview was recorded using an iPhone 8 mobile phone and then manually transcribed with Microsoft words 2019 version for further analysis.

A total of 20 students were asked to write reflective journals over a period of two weeks. They were provided with guiding questions to help them reflect on their intercultural experiences, such as experiences when encountering cultural differences in class, their responses to culturally related materials, and their personal reflections on English learning. The journals were collected at the end of each week and analyzed to examine students' personal engagement in the intercultural learning process.

Key institutional and instructional documents were analyzed, including curriculum guidelines, English textbooks, and lesson plans. The researcher examined the extent to which these documents incorporated intercultural themes, the degree of cultural integration in the teaching materials, and their alignment with ICC principles. This document analysis functioned to strengthen the findings from the observations, interviews, and reflective journals, thereby enhancing data validity through the triangulation process.

2.4. Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis was conducted using a thematic approach guided by Deardorff's (2006) ICC model, which categorized intercultural competence into three main dimensions, namely attitude (openness to cultural differences), knowledge (cultural awareness), and skills (ability to adapt in communication). All data obtained from classroom observations, interviews, reflective journals, and document analysis were coded and grouped according to these dimensions to find patterns relevant to the research objectives. This process allowed the researcher to connect the real experiences of teachers and students

with existing theoretical frameworks, making the analysis results more focused and meaningful. Permatasari & Andriyanti (2021) emphasized that the application of the recognized ICC framework strengthened the conceptual foundation of the research while increasing its contribution to intercultural education studies. In its implementation, this research also strictly adhered to ethical principles, ensuring participant confidentiality and fully voluntary participation, thereby maintaining the integrity of the research while enhancing its academic value.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. *Teaching Strategies for Intercultural Communication*

The findings showed that English teachers in the Islamic boarding school developed a range of intercultural communication strategies that were adapted to the students' multilingual and faith-based context. These strategies not only focused on language mastery but also fostered cultural awareness and the interconnectedness between language, values, and students' everyday experiences.

In daily practice, teachers frequently employed a mixed-language approach by switching between Indonesian and English. English vocabulary and grammar structures were often introduced through Indonesian explanations or culturally familiar analogies. This pattern made the material more accessible and created an inclusive learning atmosphere for students with varying levels of English proficiency. Observation data supported this finding: the item on integrating cultural discussions into English lessons received a high mean score of 4.2. (This score was derived from the researcher's rating on the 5-point observation scale), indicating that teachers consistently incorporated cultural aspects into their teaching.

Teachers also made use of digital media, particularly YouTube videos that illustrated Western cultural practices, such as British tea traditions or the American Thanksgiving celebration. Specifically, in two of the four observed sessions, these materials were used not only to stimulate classroom discussions but were also paired with Islamic cultural examples, such as the lives of Muslim communities in predominantly non-Muslim countries. This combination enabled students to recognize similarities and differences across cultures within a familiar religious framework, thereby improving their language skills while encouraging openness to diversity. Observation data also noted that the use of authentic intercultural examples received a mean score of 4.0, showing that such examples were employed fairly consistently.

Another prominent strategy involved linguistic and cultural interlinking. Teachers connected English to both Arabic and Indonesian, the two languages most familiar to students in the *Pesantren*. This comparative approach not only facilitated understanding but also fostered awareness that languages do not stand alone, but rather are interconnected within a multilingual framework. Nevertheless, the findings also revealed certain limitations. The use of interactive strategies, such as role-play and digital simulations was still infrequent, with a mean score of 3.5. This suggests that, although teachers had successfully integrated cultural aspects into teaching, there was still room for improvement in providing students with practical intercultural communication experiences. Overall, these findings demonstrated that implementing ICC in a rural, faith-based *Pesantren* required deliberate adaptation of teaching methods. Such pedagogical adaptation ultimately requires the active role of teachers, who function not only as language instructors but also as facilitators bridging language, culture, and religious values. In this way, English learning becomes more contextual, relevant, and meaningful to students' lives.

3.2. *Challenges in Fostering Intercultural Communication*

The results of the study showed that the application of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) in English language learning in Islamic boarding schools faced a number of challenges influenced by linguistic, psychological, and social factors. These obstacles not only affected the development of

students' language skills but also limited their opportunities to build a deeper cross-cultural understanding.

Difficulties in pronunciation were one of the main challenges, with Javanese students often struggling with sounds absent in their native languages, such as the \$/ \theta /\$ sound in the word *think*. Psychological factors also had a significant influence; many students felt embarrassed and afraid of making mistakes when speaking, limiting opportunities for active cultural exchange. This was supported by the results of the observation data, where the item "adjusting language to the cultural context" only received an average score of 3.6, indicating that adaptation efforts existed but were not consistent.

From a linguistic perspective, the influence of Indonesian on English language structure was also common. Many students transferred Indonesian sentence patterns into English, which resulted in grammatical errors. Common mistakes included omitting articles (I go school instead of I go to school) and incorrect verb tense usage. This indicated that there were fundamental differences between the structures of the two languages that students did not yet fully understand. Another challenge arose from the socio-cultural dynamics within the *Pesantren* environment. Although *Pesantren* fostered diversity, rivalry between students from different cultural backgrounds was sometimes unavoidable. Students occasionally competed for the teacher's attention or tried to dominate the class, which disrupted the collaborative spirit that was crucial in intercultural dialogue. Observations noted that the item on "understanding different cultural norms" only scored an average of 3.5, and "challenges in intercultural exchange" scored 3.2, indicating that students still often found it difficult to maintain in-depth cross-cultural dialogue.

Overall, these findings confirmed that linguistic limitations, low self-confidence, and competitive social dynamics were significant barriers to the development of ICC in religious boarding schools. Therefore, improvement efforts needed to include strengthening linguistic support, providing a safe space for speaking, and managing social interactions so that language learning was not only linguistically effective but also helped to build an open attitude towards cultural diversity.

3.3. Students' Perceptions and Responses

Students generally demonstrated positive perceptions of the implementation of translanguaging in English language learning, as this strategy helped them feel more confident and comfortable in expressing their ideas. Most students stated that the use of mixed languages made it easier for them to understand complex material, particularly new vocabulary and grammatical structures. Field evidence supported these findings. The results of the interviews showed that several students reported feeling more encouraged to speak when the teacher provided explanations in Indonesian before asking them to try again in English. One student stated, "*When the teacher explains first in Indonesian, I understand more quickly. After that, I can try to answer in English without being afraid of making mistakes.*" This finding confirmed that translanguaging functioned as a bridge between students' linguistic limitations and the demands of learning.

In addition, the self-assessment checklist completed by 18 students provided numerical evidence that strengthened the interview and observation results. The students' perceptions of their intercultural communicative behavior on a scale of 1–5 are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Students' Self-Assessment on Intercultural Communication Behavior

| No. | Intercultural Communicative Behavior Indicator | Mean Score (1-5 Scale) | Interpretation |
|-----|--|------------------------|----------------|
| 1. | Respecting others (tolerance of differences) | 4.5 | Very High |
| 2. | Using polite language and appropriate manners | 4.4 | Very High |
| 3. | Active engagement in discussions | 3.5 | Moderate |
| 4. | Comfort in cross-cultural interaction | 3.6 | Moderate |

The table 1 shows consistency with the field findings: high scores appeared in the indicators of respecting others (4.5) and using polite language (4.4), while lower scores were observed in active engagement in discussions (3.5) and comfort in cross-cultural interaction (3.6). This result aligns with the interview findings, which revealed that some students were still hesitant to speak due to fear of making mistakes. Although a small number of students still felt awkward when using English exclusively, the majority considered translanguaging to be a strategy that helped them learn more effectively. Thus, the combination of interview, observation, and checklist data consistently showed that translanguaging was positively received by students and contributed to the creation of an inclusive classroom atmosphere.

Discussion

The findings of this study showed that the use of a mixed-language approach, particularly translanguaging, was highly beneficial in the *pesantren* context. The strategy not only helped students overcome linguistic limitations but also positively influenced their attitude towards intercultural interaction. This aligns with Huang & Chalmers (2023) who highlight that pedagogical translanguaging tends to yield better results than English-only approaches. Furthermore, the high student scores in "respecting others" (4.5) suggest that the inclusive atmosphere fostered by translanguaging encourages tolerance and cultural curiosity—a crucial attitude component of Deardorff's ICC model. Similarly, Khairunnisa and Lukmana (2020) report that Indonesian EFL teachers generally hold positive attitudes toward translanguaging, considering the use of Indonesian and local languages as supportive tools for facilitating students' learning. These converging findings confirm that translanguaging not only received positive acceptance from students but also gained support from teachers, thus reinforcing its pedagogical value in strengthening English learning in EFL classrooms.

Beyond translanguaging, the study revealed that teachers also employed interlingual connections by linking English with Arabic and Indonesian, two languages already familiar to students. This practice strengthens comprehension and reflects a multilingual pedagogy that mirrors the dynamics of interlingual relations in society (Jafarova, 2021). Analytically, this strategy reinforces students' awareness that language is not a neutral tool but inherently reflects cultural values and identities—a key component of the knowledge dimension of ICC. By situating English within their existing cultural repertoires (Arabic/Islamic values and Indonesian culture), teachers facilitated a deeper, non-threatening engagement with the new language and its associated cultures.

The integration of digital media, particularly YouTube, also contributed to the development of intercultural communication. Videos increased students' motivation and participation, consistent with Shopia et al., (2022) who show that YouTube enhances students' engagement in language learning. However, several students admitted to feeling unfamiliar with some of the cultural representations in the videos, which sometimes led to stereotypes or misinterpretations. Al Ghoni et al., (2024) similarly warn that digital content may misrepresent Islamic values, underscoring the need for careful material selection. Thus, while YouTube enriched intercultural exposure, its use must be selective and culturally sensitive to ensure alignment with authentic religious and cultural values.

Despite these innovative strategies, challenges persisted in the classroom. One major linguistic difficulty lay in pronunciation. Javanese students, particularly from Central and East Java, often struggled with English sounds absent in their mother tongue, such as /θ/ in the word *think*. This finding supports Wardani & Suwartono (2019) who both confirm that Javanese learners face systematic difficulties in pronouncing certain vowels and consonants due to intralingual and interlingual factors. However, Karlina et al., (2020) argue that pronunciation teaching should prioritize intelligibility rather than native-like accuracy. Their proposal of *Phonetic Alphabets for Bahasa Indonesia (PABI)* offers a practical adaptation that fits the Indonesian context. These contrasting perspectives suggest that while mother tongue interference poses real challenges, a focus on intelligibility provides a more realistic and culturally appropriate pedagogical solution.

Psychological factors also emerged as significant barriers to intercultural communication. Many students experienced anxiety, shyness, and fear of making mistakes when speaking English, which limited their participation in discussions and role-plays. This finding resonates with Afriani (2021) who highlights low self-confidence and speaking anxiety as common obstacles in EFL classrooms. Similarly, Nasution & Daulay (2023) show that communication apprehension restricts students' opportunities for intercultural interaction. The low mean scores for "active engagement" (3.5) and limited use of interactive strategies (3.5) underscore the need for creating safe psychological spaces to practice the skills dimension of ICC, which includes behavioral flexibility and communication adaptability. These psychological barriers reinforce the importance of creating safe spaces for oral practice, where mistakes are normalized as part of the learning process, thereby encouraging students to engage more actively in intercultural dialogue.

Grammatical errors also characterized students' performance, particularly the omission of articles and misuse of tense, which reflected cross-linguistic transfer from Indonesian. This observation is supported by Adiantika (2020) who confirm that structural differences between Indonesian and English, especially in declarative sentences and tense usage, contribute to systematic errors. However, Sillfiana et al., (2023) argues that intralingual factors such as overgeneralization and omission, as well as non-linguistic conditions like monotonous learning environments, also play a major role in shaping grammatical mistakes. Taken together, these findings suggest that while first language interference is influential, grammar errors in EFL classrooms result from a complex interaction of interlingual, intralingual, and psychological factors.

Finally, the study also revealed that interactive strategies such as role-play and simulations were rarely implemented, despite their potential for fostering intercultural competence. The average score of 3.5 in this area indicated that practical opportunities for intercultural engagement were underutilized. This contrasts with Rahman & Maarof (2018) who demonstrate that role-play and simulations significantly improve oral communication and create more positive learning environments. The limited use of these strategies suggests that pesantren-based ELT classrooms still have untapped potential for enhancing intercultural learning through experiential methods.

Overall, the discussion highlights that while translanguaging, interlingual connections, and digital media provided valuable pathways to intercultural competence, students continued to face challenges related to pronunciation, grammar, and psychological barriers. These findings underscore the need for a balanced pedagogy that integrates supportive linguistic strategies, culturally sensitive media, and psychologically safe learning environments. Importantly, this study extends previous research by situating the discussion of ICC within a *Pesantren* context, offering fresh insights into how intercultural learning is negotiated at the intersection of religious, local, and global values.

4. CONCLUSION

This qualitative case study examines how teachers implement intercultural communication strategies, the challenges they face, and how students perceive intercultural learning in a faith-based, multilingual educational setting. The findings yield two primary conclusions: First, teachers successfully employ innovative linguistic strategies—translanguaging and interlingual connections—

along with digital media integration, which effectively strengthen the Attitude (respect, tolerance) and Knowledge (cultural awareness) dimensions of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) by utilizing students' religious and multilingual repertoires. Second, ICC development is severely constrained by persistent barriers, including linguistic difficulties (pronunciation, grammar interference) and psychological limitations (shyness, anxiety), which result in low scores for active engagement (3.5–3.6). This highlights that while students uphold high standards of respect and politeness, there is a gap in developing the Skills dimension of ICC necessary for proactive cross-cultural dialogue.

The study carries both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, this research contributes a novel perspective by situating ICC within the under-explored Islamic boarding school context, demonstrating that effective ICC integration requires deliberate, contextual alignment with faith-based values. Practically, the findings underscore the need for targeted pedagogical strategies: moving forward, educators must implement confidence-building activities, pronunciation-focused exercises, and structured group tasks designed to normalize mistakes and encourage active verbal participation, thereby bridging the gap between passive respect and active intercultural skill. For future research, it is recommended to investigate the longitudinal impact of these tailored ICC strategies or conduct a comparative study on learning outcomes between rural and urban Islamic schools to provide a broader, contextualized understanding of global communication demands in faith-based education.

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