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English Teachers Promoting Intercultural Awareness in Multilingual Context of Indonesian Pesantren

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ABSTRACT

The growing recognition of English as a global language has positioned intercultural awareness as an essential dimension of English language teaching. Within this perspective, teaching English is not limited to the mastery of linguistic forms but extends to preparing learners to negotiate cultural diversity, critically reflect on values, and engage meaningfully in multilingual and multicultural interactions. This study aimed to explore teachers' initiatives in promoting intercultural awareness within ELT in the multilingual context of Islamic boarding schools, called pesantren. Involving ten English teachers of pesantren schools in Lampung province, Sumatra, Indonesia, the research investigates how English teachers integrate intercultural perspectives into classroom practices while navigating religious, local, and linguistic diversity. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. The findings reveal that teachers embed intercultural content through local wisdom (e.g., traditional stories), comparative cultural discussions (e.g., contrasting religious rituals across countries), and collaborative language tasks (e.g., group projects on cultural storytelling) that reflect students' sociocultural and multilingual realities. Teachers leverage students' diverse linguistic knowledge—such as Indonesian, Javanese, English, and Arabic—to scaffold understanding, build cultural connections, and foster critical reflection. These initiatives demonstrate a context-sensitive approach that not only enhances intercultural competence but also positions multilingual repertoires as resources for meaningful ELT. The study contributes to the growing body of work on localized, teacher-driven innovations in intercultural language education.

Keywords: Intercultural Awareness; English Language Teaching; Multilingual Education; Pesantren

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

English language classrooms in Indonesian pesantren are not merely spaces for acquiring linguistic competence; they are complex cultural environments where religious values, local traditions, and multilingual practices converge. Students in these Islamic boarding schools regularly engage with multiple languages—Bahasa Indonesia as the national language, Arabic for religious instruction, local vernaculars such as Javanese, and English as a foreign language—each serving distinct functions in their educational and social lives^[1]. For English teachers operating in this context, teaching the language is not only about grammar and vocabulary, but also about negotiating meaning, fostering cultural understanding, and responding to the lived realities of their students.

Over the last two decades, the focus in English Language Teaching (ELT) has gradually shifted away from adhering to native-speaker norms. Scholars have increasingly advocated for culturally responsive pedagogies that acknowledge the diversity of learners' backgrounds^[2–4]. Intercultural communicative competence—understood as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from different cultural backgrounds—is now widely regarded as a central aim of language education in a globalized world. Although interculturality in ELT has been widely studied, research has often focused on mainstream or urban school settings. This leaves less attention given to how intercultural issues are addressed in more localized, religious, and multilingual environments, such as pesantren. These environments provide unique insights into how intercultural awareness and linguistic practices coexist, and they deserve closer examination in global language education discourse.

Incorporating intercultural awareness into English language teaching in multilingual contexts poses its own unique set of challenges. Teachers are often required to mediate not only between different cultures but also between multiple languages, religious values, and educational expectations^[5, 6]. In pesantren contexts, these challenges are heightened by the need to balance global cultural content with the preservation of Islamic identity and local traditions^[7]. The lack of teaching materials that reflect both intercultural and multilingual dimensions, limited opportunities for teacher training on cul-

turally responsive pedagogy, and constrained classroom time further complicate the integration of intercultural awareness. Additionally, institutional curricula often prioritize grammatical competence and examination results, leaving little space for reflective dialogue, comparative cultural exploration, or language practices that validate students' full linguistic repertoires^[4]. As a result, although teachers may recognize the importance of intercultural learning, they may struggle to implement it meaningfully within the confines of existing pedagogical structures.

1.2. Research Gap

In Indonesia, pesantren represent a significant yet underexamined educational setting for English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly in relation to intercultural dimensions. As Islamic boarding schools, pesantren embody complex cultural, religious, and linguistic dynamics that distinguish them from mainstream secular educational institutions. Although a growing number of studies have investigated English teaching in pesantren, these have predominantly focused on surface-level challenges such as curriculum limitations, lack of teacher proficiency, or learner motivation. For instance, Madkur and As'ad found that pesantren teachers face the challenge of integrating English instruction while preserving religious values, often leading to a tension between cultural preservation and the need for global communication skills^[8]. Farid and Lamb found how pesantren students relate their English learning motivation to religious purposes, but unfortunately, the relation is not consistently translated into practices^[9]. Other studies revealed that rural pesantren often struggle with inadequate resources and teacher training, which can limit the effectiveness of ELT programs and the limited chances to use English beyond the classroom setting^[1], which could negatively affect students' language development^[10]. These studies have not yet addressed the gap of how intercultural awareness is conceptualized and practiced in pesantren-based ELT.

Recognizing the intersection of multilingualism, religious identity, and intercultural awareness in pesantren is essential for developing pedagogies that are both contextually grounded and globally relevant. While national curriculum policies in Indonesia increasingly emphasize character education^[11], there remains little practical guidance on how English teachers in pesantren can translate these ideals into

classroom practices that respect local values while cultivating intercultural openness. Moreover, most models of intercultural competence in ELT are shaped by Western secular assumptions, which may not fully resonate with the pedagogical goals and cultural realities of Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia. By foregrounding the voices and agency of English teachers in pesantren, this study aims to uncover locally generated strategies that adapt and reinterpret intercultural goals in ways that are meaningful within their communities. In doing so, the research contributes to a more inclusive understanding of intercultural language education that reflects diverse epistemologies and schooling traditions^[12, 13].

1.3. Purpose

This study seeks to explore teacher-led initiatives in promoting intercultural awareness in English classrooms within pesantren. Specifically, it investigates how English teachers perceive, implement, and navigate intercultural pedagogies in the multilingual, religious schooling system. To guide this inquiry, the study is framed by the following research questions:

1. How do English teachers in pesantren perceive intercultural awareness in the context of English Language Teaching?
2. In what ways do teachers integrate intercultural perspectives into their classroom practices?
3. How do teachers utilize students' multilingual backgrounds to support intercultural learning?
4. What challenges and opportunities do teachers encounter in implementing intercultural approaches within pesantren settings?

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on teacher-led intercultural practices in a non-Western, religious context. It highlights the integration of multilingual repertoires in promoting intercultural learning and explores intercultural ELT beyond standardized curriculum models. Through this lens, the research offers both theoretical and practical contributions to the field of ELT, intercultural communication, and multilingual education in underrepresented contexts. Theoretically, it contributes to the existing body of literature on intercultural awareness in ELT by providing an in-depth case study from a unique educational context. The findings will enrich the understanding of how intercultural awareness can

be effectively integrated into ELT curricula in multilingual settings. Practically, the study offers valuable insights for ELT teachers, administrators, and policymakers in Indonesia and beyond. By highlighting successful teacher-led initiatives and identifying common challenges, this study aims to inform the development of more inclusive and effective ELT programs that promote intercultural competence.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore teacher-led initiatives for promoting intercultural awareness in English language classrooms within pesantren settings. The case study approach is particularly well-suited for an in-depth investigation of teachers' pedagogical practices and beliefs situated within their sociocultural and religious environments. This method allows for a detailed examination of the complexities and nuances of educational practices in a specific context, providing rich and contextualized insights into the phenomena under study^[14]. Given the interpretive nature of the inquiry and the emphasis on context-sensitive perspectives, qualitative methods were considered appropriate to address the study's research questions. Qualitative research is particularly effective in capturing the lived experiences and subjective meanings of participants^[15], which are essential for understanding the dynamics of intercultural awareness in ELT. With a focus on the specific case of pesantren in Indonesia, this study aims to provide a detailed account of how teachers navigate the challenges and opportunities of fostering intercultural competence in a multilingual and multicultural setting.

2.2. Research Setting and Participants

The research was conducted in six pesantren schools located in Lampung Province, Indonesia. These schools were selected using purposive sampling to ensure variation in linguistic and educational practices. The selection criteria included their linguistic repertoires, teaching experiences and type of pesantren. The study involved ten English teachers, both male and female, with teaching experience ranging from 3 to 15 years. **Table 1** below provides a detailed overview of the participants:

Table 1. Overview of Participants.

Participant Code	Gender	Years of Teaching Experience	Pesantren Type	Linguistic Repertoires
T1	Male	3	Modern (khalaf)	Multilingual (Indonesian, Arabic, English)
T2	Female	5	Traditional (salaf)	Bilingual (Indonesian, Arabic)
T3	Male	7	Integrated (Modern + traditional)	Multilingual (Indonesian, Javanese, English)
T4	Female	6	Modern	Bilingual (Indonesian, English)
T5	Male	15	Traditional	Multilingual (Indonesian, Arabic, Lampungese)
T6	Female	10	Modern	Bilingual (Indonesian, English)
T7	Male	12	Integrated	Multilingual (Indonesian, Arabic, English)
T8	Female	8	Modern	Multilingual (Indonesian, Sundanese, English)
T9	Male	4	Salaf	Bilingual (Indonesian, Arabic)
T10	Female	9	Integrated	Multilingual (Indonesian, English, Local Language)

The participants in this study represent a diverse range of gender identities, teaching experiences, and pesantren types (khalaf, salaf, and integrated). This diversity is significant as it allows the study to capture varied pedagogical beliefs and intercultural strategies shaped by different institutional, social, and religious environments. For instance, teachers from modern pesantren often adopt more integrated curricula that include global and intercultural content, while those from traditional pesantren may face stricter curricular boundaries. Similarly, gender dynamics influence classroom interaction and teachers' roles, particularly in gender-segregated schools. Varying years of teaching experience also offer insight into how intercultural awareness evolves over time and with exposure to changing educational policies. This heterogeneity enriches the data and supports a more nuanced understanding of intercultural ELT in Indonesia's multilingual Islamic education landscape.

2.3. Data Collection Procedures

Data were gathered using three main methods: semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and document analysis. Each method employed tailored instruments to ensure consistency and depth of data collection.

- **Interview Protocol.** A semi-structured interview guide was developed to explore teachers' perceptions of intercultural awareness, strategies for integrating intercultural content, use of multilingual resources, and perceived challenges and supports in the pesantren context. The guide included both open-ended core questions and optional probes to allow flexibility. Interviews were con-

ducted in Bahasa Indonesia or English based on participant preference, and each lasted approximately 45–60 minutes. The interview questions were designed to elicit detailed insights into teachers' beliefs and practices regarding intercultural awareness in their ELT classrooms.

- **Observation Sheet.** A structured classroom observation sheet was used to record key pedagogical behaviors and intercultural elements during English lessons. The sheet included fields for documenting teacher-student interaction, language use (including code-switching), references to cultural content (local or global), student engagement, and classroom materials. Observations were non-participatory, and each teacher was observed teaching two lessons. This allowed for a comprehensive understanding of how teachers implemented intercultural awareness in their teaching practices and how students responded to these initiatives.
- **Document Checklist.** A checklist guided the analysis of teaching documents such as lesson plans, handouts, textbooks, and institutional guidelines. The instrument focused on identifying the presence of intercultural objectives, multilingual references, and cultural themes across instructional materials. The document analysis provided insights into the planned and actual implementation of intercultural awareness in the ELT curriculum. This method ensured that the study captured both the intended and enacted curriculum, offering a holistic view of the educational environment.

Each instrument was piloted with two non-participant teachers from a comparable pesantren setting and revised for clarity and contextual appropriateness prior to data collection.

2.4. Data Analysis

The data collected through interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis were analyzed using a combined approach of thematic analysis and content analysis. This approach integrates the interpretive depth of thematic analysis with the structured nature of content analysis, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under study.

Interview transcripts were analyzed using six-phase thematic analysis, which provides a systematic framework for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns (themes) within qualitative data. The six steps (as can be seen in **Figure 1**) include: (1) familiarization with the data; (2) gen-

erating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the report^[16]. Each step of this analysis technique is elaborated as follows.

First, I read multiple times to ensure deep familiarity with the content. Second, initial codes were generated inductively, focusing on recurring ideas related to intercultural awareness, multilingual practices, and pedagogical strategies. Third, these codes were then organized into potential themes, and fourth, the themes were reviewed for consistency and relevance across participants. Fifth, the themes were refined and named, and finally, analytical narratives were constructed to present the findings supported by direct quotations from the data.

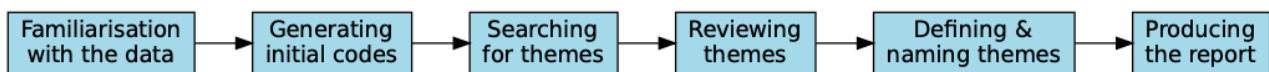


Figure 1. Six Phases of Thematic Analysis.

Thematic analysis was also applied to the document data, including lesson plans, teaching handouts, and curriculum guidelines. These documents were examined for explicit or implicit references to intercultural goals, multilingual elements, and pedagogical intentions. The same six-step process was followed, with initial coding focusing on intercultural content, language use, and instructional strategies. The analysis enabled comparison and triangulation with the interview data, enhancing the credibility and depth of the findings.

For observation data, I applied qualitative content analysis to identify patterns in teacher-student interaction, language use, and integration of cultural content^[17]. This included coding instances of intercultural elements and multilingual practices. Similarly, document analysis focused on teaching materials (e.g., lesson plans and handouts), identifying the presence of intercultural goals and multilingual references. These methods enabled triangulation across data sources.

2.5. Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure the reliability and validity of the findings, data from the three sources (interviews, observations, and documents) were triangulated. This involved comparing and cross-referencing the data to identify consistent patterns

and discrepancies. Triangulation helped to corroborate the findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the teacher-led initiatives for intercultural awareness in the pesantren context. Additionally, member checking was conducted by sharing the preliminary findings with the participants to validate their accuracy and ensure that the interpretations aligned with their experiences. This process enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the study.

2.6. Ethical Considerations

The study received approval from the State Islamic Institute of Metro Research Ethics Committee. All participants provided informed consent and were informed of their rights to withdraw at any time without consequence. To maintain anonymity and protect the privacy of the participants, pseudonyms (e.g., T1, T2) were used to identify teachers, and student data were anonymized.

3. Results

3.1. Embedding Intercultural Content through Local Wisdom and Religious Values

The findings reveal that teachers frequently infused their lessons with cultural elements drawn from the students'

immediate environments, leveraging local proverbs, traditional stories, and Islamic teachings to encourage reflection on cultural values while comparing them with global perspectives.

3.1.1. Storytelling and Local Proverbs

Teachers emphasized the importance of grounding intercultural awareness in familiar cultural contexts to make the content more relatable and engaging for students. For example, T2 shared:

“I often start with stories from our pesantren life like how we wake up early for subuh prayer, study kitab kuning, or help clean the dorm area—and then I ask students to think about how students their age in other countries start their day. Some are surprised to learn that not all students have a strong community or spiritual routine like ours.”

This response illustrates how teachers in pesantren make intercultural learning more accessible by anchoring it in students’ everyday experiences. By drawing from routines and cultural practices familiar to students—such as life in the pesantren, communal activities, or religious customs—teachers help learners build connections between their own world and the broader global context. This method not only enhances student engagement but also fosters reflection on cultural similarities and differences. This approach shows that intercultural awareness does not require distant or abstract content; rather, it can begin meaningfully from within the learners’ immediate cultural environment.

Classroom observations revealed that teachers effectively implemented these strategies in their lessons. For instance, during a lesson observed in Teacher 2’s class, students were engaged in a discussion about cultural norms in addressing authority figures. The teacher highlighted the Indonesian practice of using respectful titles like “Pak” or “Bu” when addressing teachers such as Pak Budi, Bu Nurul and so forth. This is different from the more informal practices in Western countries, such as Australia, where students often address teachers by their first names, such as Jack, Andrew, Barbara, and so on. This comparison sparked a lively discussion among students, demonstrating their active engagement and interest in understanding cultural differences. T4 elaborated on this strategy:

“We use local proverbs and traditional stories that the students know well. Then, we discuss how these values are similar or different from those in other cultures. This helps them see that while we have our own unique way of doing things, there are also many commonalities.”

Here, T4’s explanation reveals a thoughtful approach to building intercultural insight through storytelling. The use of familiar expressions such as proverbs and tales allowed students to start from a place of confidence and personal connection. Once students are comfortable with the cultural material, they are then guided to compare it with stories and values from other cultures. This process encourages them to recognize both distinct characteristics and shared values across cultural boundaries. Rather than presenting culture as a fixed set of facts, the teacher fosters a space where students can actively engage in comparing perspectives and forming personal reflections.

3.1.2. Islamic Moral Anchors

In addition to local cultural elements, teachers also incorporated Islamic teachings to promote values of tolerance, respect, and understanding. T7 explained:

“Islam teaches us to respect all human beings regardless of their background. I use these teachings to show students that intercultural awareness is not just about learning facts about other cultures, but also about developing empathy and respect.”

T7’s perspective highlights the role of religious values as a moral anchor for promoting intercultural awareness. Rather than treating intercultural learning as merely the acquisition of external knowledge, the teacher frames it as a character-building process rooted in Islamic principles. The emphasis on respect for all people, regardless of background, positions empathy as a central learning goal. This approach allows students to see intercultural competence not as something separate from their faith, but as deeply aligned with it.

Analysis of teaching documents, such as lesson plans and handouts, further supported these findings. A lesson plan prepared by T7 included activities where students were asked to compare and contrast cultural practices from different countries. The handouts provided examples of local

proverbs and traditional stories alongside global cultural references, reinforcing the integration of intercultural content in the planned curriculum. For example, one handout included a local proverb about respect and its equivalent in another culture, encouraging students to reflect on the similarities and differences.

This integration of local wisdom and religious values provided a strong foundation for intercultural awareness, helping students develop a balanced perspective that values both their own cultural identity and the diversity of others. The use of familiar cultural references also facilitated deeper engagement and discussion among students, as they were able to connect the content to their own experiences.

3.2. Intercultural Tasks through Collaborative and Reflective Activities

This theme explores how teachers designed classroom activities that engaged students in collaborative and reflective learning tasks to integrate intercultural perspectives into their classroom practices. During interviews, several teachers described specific activities that encouraged students to reflect on differences within and across cultures. For example, T1 shared:

“In one task, I asked them to write about Ramadan here and compare it with how Muslims in other countries celebrate. They were surprised that fasting hours in Europe are so long!”

This comment illustrates how comparative tasks can provoke curiosity and stimulate intercultural reflection. The students’ reaction – surprise at the length of fasting in Europe – suggests an emerging awareness of how the same practice can be shaped by differing geographic, social, and cultural realities. Rather than positioning Islamic practice as static or uniform, the activity opened space for recognizing diversity within the global Muslim community. In this way, the task not only enhanced cultural knowledge but also promoted perspective-taking and global thinking grounded in students’ religious identity. In terms of Byram’s model of ICC, such a task nurtures knowledge (*savoirs*) about cultural diversity, while simultaneously fostering skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*) by prompting students to compare and connect their own practices with those of others.

Observation data confirmed the implementation of such

tasks in the classroom. In one session, T1’s students presented short essays comparing their Ramadan experiences in Indonesia with fasting practices in Turkey and the UK. These presentations sparked class discussions in which students asked questions and shared personal insights, fostering dialogic learning. Collaborative speaking tasks were also common. T3 described an activity in which students role-played conversations with foreigners:

“I gave them a situation where they had to explain Indonesian greetings and politeness norms to a foreigner. Then, they had to switch roles and try to greet the way people do in other countries.”

In observed sessions, students engaged in these simulations with enthusiasm, often referencing examples from movies, textbooks, or their own multilingual experiences. These role-plays cultivated critical cultural awareness (*savoir s’engager*) by prompting learners to reflect on the appropriateness of behaviors in different contexts, as well as attitudes of curiosity and openness (*savoir être*), which Byram identifies as foundational for intercultural competence.

Teaching documents further supported these findings. Lesson plans prepared by T3 and T6 included assignments such as cross-cultural poster projects and guided reflections. One worksheet asked students to “list three ways Indonesian weddings differ from Western weddings,” and then reflect on the values these practices embody. The documents also included criteria for assessing students’ ability to express comparisons respectfully and accurately in English. T6 explained the rationale behind these activities:

“When they see how different yet meaningful other traditions are, they start to understand that there’s not just one right way of doing things.”

This response reveals a key pedagogical shift toward fostering openness and flexibility in students’ cultural thinking. The teacher emphasizes the importance of exposing learners to a variety of cultural expressions, not to evaluate them against a single norm, but to appreciate the underlying meanings and values. Such realizations signal the early development of intercultural sensitivity, where students come to accept that different cultural practices can coexist without being placed in a hierarchy. From the perspective of

Byram's model, such activities develop students' critical cultural awareness by encouraging them to evaluate practices from multiple perspectives without imposing a hierarchy of values.

Overall, the classroom tasks observed in this study – ranging from written comparisons to collaborative role-plays and reflective projects – aligned closely with Byram's ICC dimensions. They promoted knowledge of cultural diversity, skills for interpreting and interacting, attitudes of curiosity and openness, and critical cultural awareness. In the pesantren context, these tasks not only supported language learning but also nurtured intercultural competence as an

integral part of moral and character education.

3.3. Utilizing Multilingual Repertoires to Scaffold Intercultural Understanding

This theme explores the ways in which pesantren teachers intentionally drew upon students' multilingual repertoires to facilitate intercultural understanding. Teachers used the specific ways local language, Bahasa Indonesia, and Arabic were strategically integrated into lessons to scaffold intercultural understanding, illustrating how each language served distinct pedagogical purposes (see **Table 2**).

Table 2. The Specific Use of Languages (Local Language, Arabic, Bahasa Indonesia) in Lessons.

Language	Example Use in Lessons	Pedagogical Purpose
Local	Explaining unfamiliar English phrases using Javanese equivalents (e.g., “slow and steady wins the race” explained using “ <i>alon-alon asal kelakon</i> ”)	Linking new concepts to students' daily life and cultural norms
Bahasa Indonesia	Clarifying cultural contexts (e.g., bowing in Japan, handshakes in the West)	Ensuring comprehension of intercultural concepts
Arabic	Using greetings like <i>Assalamu 'alaikum</i> to compare politeness norms across cultures	Drawing parallels between Islamic and global cultural practices

From **Table 2** above, it can be seen that, other than viewing the use of multiple languages as a hindrance to English acquisition, teachers in this study used Bahasa Indonesia, Arabic, and local languages to support comprehension, deepen reflection, and connect intercultural content to students' lived experiences. T5 explained:

“When students don't understand, I explain in Javanese or Indonesian first, then come back to English. It helps them connect the meaning to their daily lives.”

Classroom observations confirmed this practice. In one observed lesson on global greetings and etiquette, T5 began the discussion in English, then switched to Bahasa Indonesia to clarify the cultural significance of bowing in Japanese and shaking hands in Western contexts. Students responded by sharing how they greet elders in their own ethnic groups — for instance, by kissing the hand or using respectful body posture — demonstrating both understanding and engagement. T8 reflected on how using Arabic expressions also helped contextualize cultural discussions:

“Sometimes, I use Arabic greetings like ‘As-

salamu'alaikum' when talking about politeness. Then, I ask them how that compares with greetings in English or other cultures. It makes it more real for them.”

This intentional multilingual scaffolding enabled students to explore intercultural topics through familiar linguistic and cultural frames, while gradually building their capacity to articulate those ideas in English. It also affirmed students' home languages and cultural identities as assets in the learning process. Teaching documents echoed these practices. Lesson plans from T8 included instructions in both English and Bahasa Indonesia, especially for tasks that required deeper reflection, such as comparing cultural rituals or interpreting short proverbs. Some worksheets encouraged students to translate idiomatic expressions from their mother tongues into English and explain their cultural significance, which not only built language awareness but also invited peer discussion and intercultural comparison.

These multilingual strategies were not random code-switching but intentional, pedagogically motivated acts that expanded access to content, fostered inclusion, and honored the sociolinguistic realities of the pesantren environ-

ment. Rather than enforcing strict English-only policies, these teachers embraced linguistic diversity as a strength and scaffold for meaning-making.

3.4. Navigating Institutional and Curriculum Constraints

This theme explores the systemic and institutional challenges that pesantren teachers encounter when attempting to integrate intercultural approaches in their English teaching. Although participants expressed a strong commitment to fostering intercultural understanding, many noted that structural limitations — such as curriculum overload, exam pressures, and limited administrative support — often hindered these efforts. As T9 explained:

“The curriculum is packed, and we’re expected to prepare students for national exams. There’s not much room to explore culture deeply.”

Some other teachers such as T3, T8 and T10 echoed this concern, describing how national standards prioritize grammar, vocabulary, and test-taking skills over exploratory or dialogic activities. Classroom observations supported this view. In a lesson observed in T8’s class, the entire 90-minute session was dedicated to reading comprehension drills, with little time left for cultural discussions that had been briefly introduced at the beginning of the lesson. While the teacher attempted to make space for intercultural topics, time constraints ultimately dictated a return to test-focused material. T6 elaborated further:

“I want to bring in topics about global cultures or even Islamic perspectives from other countries, but I’m afraid it won’t align with the syllabus.”

This quote highlights another key issue — institutional rigidity. Many pesantren operate within centralized or standardized educational systems that discourage teacher autonomy. Analysis of lesson plans revealed that while some teachers attempted to insert intercultural objectives informally, these were often absent from the formal instructional documents. The official plans emphasized linguistic targets such as tenses, modals, and passive voice, with only occasional references to broader cultural themes. Moreover, several teachers reported a lack of institutional encourage-

ment or professional development opportunities related to intercultural teaching. T10 noted:

“I’ve never received any training specifically about how to teach intercultural awareness. We’re mostly left to figure it out on our own.”

This absence of structured support makes it difficult for teachers to confidently implement intercultural approaches, especially when they fear being perceived as deviating from academic goals. Some also cited concerns that intercultural topics might be misunderstood or seen as politically or religiously sensitive, leading to further hesitancy. T7 shared a similar concern:

“Sometimes I hold back because I’m not sure how certain cultural topics will be received. It’s not always clear what’s considered appropriate to discuss.”

These accounts reflect the uncertainty teachers experience in navigating intercultural content, particularly when there are no clear guidelines or assurances from their institutions. The potential for misinterpretation or discomfort can lead to cautiousness, even among teachers who value intercultural learning.

This theme reveals that while teachers are motivated to foster intercultural awareness, their efforts are often constrained by systemic pressures including assessment demands, inflexible curricula, and lack of institutional support. These barriers point to the need for broader structural changes to enable intercultural teaching to flourish. Such changes might include curriculum redesign, revised assessment frameworks, and school-level leadership that actively encourages intercultural initiatives. To address these challenges, future support mechanisms could include targeted professional development programs on integrating intercultural learning within existing syllabus constraints, as well as mentoring schemes where experienced teachers share adaptable lesson models. Training models, such as lesson study cycles in which teachers collaboratively plan, teach, and refine intercultural lessons, could be piloted to build shared expertise while minimizing the risk of misalignment with formal requirements. In addition, online communities of practice linking pesantren teachers across regions could provide ongoing peer support, resource sharing, and collective problem-solving. School leaders and policymakers might

also consider pilot programs that integrate intercultural objectives into national assessment rubrics, thereby legitimizing and incentivizing such approaches within formal accountability systems.

4. Discussion

This study investigated how English teachers in pesantren promote intercultural awareness in multilingual classrooms through teacher-led initiatives. The findings reveal a complex interplay between teachers' pedagogical beliefs, their sociocultural and religious contexts, and their strategic use of students' linguistic repertoires. This discussion section is organized into two main parts: theoretical implications and practical implications. The theoretical implications connect the study's findings to key concepts and frameworks from intercultural competence, multilingual education, and sociocultural learning theories. The practical implications focus on how these findings can inform teacher practices, curriculum design, and policy decisions in pesantren and similar educational contexts.

4.1. Theoretical Implication

The first theme showed that teachers embedded intercultural perspectives through local wisdom and Islamic values, illustrating a culturally grounded interpretation of interculturality. This aligns with Porto and Zembylas and Scarino^[3, 6], who emphasize that intercultural competence must be understood as context-dependent and value-laden. In pesantren, teachers adapted intercultural goals to align with Islamic concepts such as *ukhuwah* (Moslem brotherhood) and local moral narratives, reflecting what Holliday terms 'small culture' orientations rooted in specific communities^[18]. This also demonstrates teacher agency in mediating between global educational discourses and local cultural worldviews^[19, 20]. The findings show that pesantren teachers often begin the process of intercultural teaching from within — drawing on students' lived experiences, religious values, and local traditions to foster awareness of other cultures. This supports Byram's notion of "critical cultural awareness," in which learners reflect on their own cultural practices in order to understand those of others^[2]. The strategic use of proverbs, traditional stories, and Islamic teachings reflects an "inside-out" approach, helping students

develop intercultural sensitivity through the familiar before extending to the global. These findings align with recent literature on context-responsive ELT^[21–23], which argues for culturally grounded pedagogies rather than imported models of intercultural competence.

The second theme highlighted how teachers actively drew on students' multilingual backgrounds—particularly Bahasa Indonesia, Arabic, and local languages—to support intercultural understanding. This supports the view of multilingualism as a pedagogical resource^[24, 25], challenging the monolingual assumptions still dominant in ELT practice. Teachers' translanguaging practices allowed for deeper cultural comparisons and conceptual clarity, illustrating how language flexibility supports students' ability to connect global issues with personal and local realities. Rather than viewing linguistic diversity as a barrier, teachers in this study used their and their students' multilingual repertoires to scaffold intercultural learning. Teachers frequently alternated between English, Bahasa Indonesia, Arabic, and local languages to clarify cultural concepts, explain unfamiliar terms, and prompt deeper reflection. This multilingual strategy reinforces the concept of translanguaging, where multiple languages are used flexibly to facilitate learning and communication^[26]. The findings challenge monolingual assumptions often embedded in English language education and highlight how multilingual practices can support intercultural goals.

The third theme revealed that teachers employed collaborative, reflective activities—such as cultural comparisons and dialogues—to foster awareness of diversity. These practices are consistent with Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence, which advocates for tasks that develop curiosity, empathy, and critical cultural reflection. However, teachers faced difficulty embedding such activities systematically due to curriculum overload and a lack of intercultural ELT materials^[27, 28]. This points to a disconnect between policy ideals (e.g., character education or global citizenship in Kurikulum Merdeka) and the practical tools available to teachers. Teachers also embedded intercultural content through activities that encouraged reflection, comparison, and collaborative exploration. These included writing assignments, class discussions, and cross-cultural comparison tasks. In line with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, these activities created opportunities for meaning-making through

social interaction and scaffolded dialogue^[29]. The use of Ramadan comparison tasks and culturally contrasting terms of address not only raised awareness of cultural diversity but also cultivated critical thinking and empathy. These classroom practices mirror what Porto and Byram describe as “intercultural citizenship education,” in which learners actively negotiate meaning across cultural boundaries^[30].

To synthesize the thematic findings and their theoretical underpinnings, **Table 3** provides a concise overview of the key theorists cited in this study and illustrates how their concepts connect directly to the four main themes identified in the findings, highlighting the theoretical foundations that underpin the teachers’ intercultural practices in the pesantren context.

Table 3. Overview of the Key Theorists and Their Connection to the Findings.

Theorist(s)	Core Concept	Connection to Findings
Byram	Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), Critical Cultural Awareness	Teachers promoted reflection on their own and others’ cultures through local wisdom, proverbs, and religious values.
Porto & Zembylas	Intercultural competence as context-dependent and value-laden	Intercultural goals aligned with Islamic concepts such as <i>ukhuwah</i> .
Scarino	Culturally grounded pedagogy	Adaptation of ICC to pesantren contexts, reflecting local and religious values.
Holliday	“Small culture” orientations	Emphasis on community-specific values in intercultural teaching.
Vygotsky	Sociocultural theory of learning	Collaborative tasks and scaffolded dialogue facilitated intercultural reflection.

4.2. Practical Implication

The final theme illustrated how institutional and curriculum pressures constrained teachers’ ability to implement intercultural approaches. Similar to findings by Zein^[31], teachers in this study cited time constraints, national exam focus, and lack of professional development as limiting factors. Yet despite these barriers, teachers demonstrated initiative by modifying tasks and drawing on available cultural and linguistic resources—an indication of “pedagogical resilience” and contextual creativity^[32]. Despite their commitment to promoting intercultural understanding, teachers faced significant constraints. These included rigid curriculum mandates, exam-focused teaching, and limited administrative support. Teachers expressed a sense of pedagogical dissonance between what they aspired to do and what they were permitted to do within institutional frameworks. These findings echo previous research on structural barriers in language education in low- and middle-income countries^[33, 34]. The absence of formal training in intercultural ELT and the lack of curriculum flexibility further hindered teacher autonomy. However, some teachers found creative ways to work around these constraints, using informal learning spaces or integrating culture subtly into language-focused tasks.

The findings underscore the importance of expanding models of intercultural ELT to include non-Western, religious schooling systems like pesantren. Intercultural competence in such contexts must consider religious literacy, multilingualism, and local cultural values—not just exposure to ‘target’ cultures. Teacher education programs should therefore include culturally responsive training that empowers teachers to design locally meaningful intercultural tasks. Additionally, curriculum developers and policymakers need to provide flexible frameworks and materials that support context-sensitive intercultural pedagogy. Taken together, the findings support intercultural teaching in which teacher practices are shaped not only by personal beliefs but also by broader institutional, cultural, and policy environments^[35]. While teacher agency plays a central role, the capacity to enact intercultural pedagogy is contingent upon systemic support and curriculum design. The study also reinforces the importance of situated intercultural competence – an understanding of culture that is dynamic, context-sensitive, and relational – as opposed to static or essentialist views.

5. Conclusions

This study explored teacher-led initiatives to promote intercultural awareness in ELT within the multilingual and

religious context of Indonesian pesantren. The research highlighted how intercultural learning is adapted, negotiated, and enacted in ways that are deeply rooted in local values, religious traditions, and linguistic diversity. The findings demonstrate that teachers embedded intercultural content through local wisdom and Islamic values, utilized students' multilingual repertoires as scaffolding tools, and designed reflective, collaborative tasks to promote cultural understanding. Despite facing institutional and curricular constraints, teachers exercised pedagogical agency and creativity to cultivate intercultural engagement in ways that are contextually meaningful.

This study contributes to the growing body of scholarship on intercultural language education by centering teacher perspectives from underrepresented, religiously affiliated schooling contexts. It challenges dominant, standardized models of intercultural ELT and calls for more inclusive, localized approaches that respect the cultural and linguistic realities of learners in faith-based education systems. The research also underscores the need for teacher education programs and curriculum policies to support the integration of intercultural and multilingual pedagogies in meaningful, flexible, and context-sensitive ways. In practical terms, recommendations include:

- Integrating intercultural objectives into curriculum planning so they are embedded in both language and character education outcomes.
- Providing targeted professional development on intercultural ELT and culturally responsive teaching.
- Developing teaching materials that combine local cultural content, Islamic values, and global perspectives.
- Encouraging teacher collaboration to exchange ideas and classroom strategies.
- Revising assessment frameworks to include measures of intercultural understanding and critical reflection.
- Promoting institutional support and policy alignment to give teachers greater flexibility and confidence in implementing intercultural themes.

This study affirms that intercultural awareness in ELT is not only possible in religious schooling contexts—it is already being practiced in innovative and locally grounded ways. Future initiatives should build upon this foundation to enhance teacher capacity, curriculum design, and research engagement in intercultural and multilingual education. The

study focused on six pesantren in one province; further research could explore how intercultural awareness is enacted across different pesantren models (e.g., urban vs. rural, modern vs. traditional). Comparative studies between pesantren and secular schools could also yield insights into how intercultural teaching varies by institutional identity. Longitudinal research might examine how sustained intercultural tasks influence student attitudes, critical thinking, or empathy over time.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Ethics Committee of State Islamic Institute of Metro (protocol code P-584.a/In.28/LPPM/PP.09/08/2024 and date of approval: 23 August 2024).

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting these results is publicly accessible via this [link](#). Please note that it is a sample, not the full dataset, due to ethical considerations.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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