

CULTURAL BARRIERS TO SPEAKING ENGLISH AMONG ISLAMIC BOARDING SCHOOL STUDENTS IN CIREBON

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Abstract: Research Objective: This study aims to identify and describe the cultural barriers that hinder the English speaking skills of Islamic boarding school (pesantren) students in Cirebon, and to explain how these barriers relate to students' psychological, sociological, and institutional experiences within the pesantren environment. Methodology: A qualitative approach with an interpretative phenomenological design was employed. Ten active pesantren students in Cirebon were selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participatory observation, documentation, and a supplementary short survey, then analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic analysis. Key Findings: Four primary cultural barriers were identified: (1) norms of politeness and unwillingness to make mistakes, (2) dominance of Arabic and regional/Indonesian languages in daily communication, (3) lack of a supportive English immersion environment, and (4) perceptions of English's role relative to curriculum priorities. Application of this research: The findings are relevant for English teachers, pesantren administrators, and curriculum developers seeking to design culturally responsive speaking instruction in Islamic boarding schools and comparable faith-based educational settings. Novelty/Originality of this research: Unlike prior studies that isolate linguistic or socio-economic barriers, this research foregrounds the interaction between religious identity, politeness norms, and language ecology as a multidimensional cultural barrier, offering a more contextually grounded basis for pesantren-specific English pedagogy.

Keywords: cultural barriers; English speaking skills; Islamic boarding school; pesantren; foreign language anxiety; qualitative research.

INTRODUCTION

English has become an undisputed lingua franca in the current era of globalization, serving as an important medium of communication in fields such as education, business, and technology. In Indonesia, despite English's growing importance, mastery of the language particularly speaking ability remains a significant challenge for many students, and this challenge is even more pronounced in traditional educational settings such as Islamic boarding schools, or pesantren, where the learning environment and cultural context differ markedly from conventional schools. Nationally, English continues to occupy an ambivalent position: it is valued as a tool for global engagement, yet it competes for curricular space and legitimacy with Arabic and regional languages, especially in religiously oriented institutions (Zein, 2019). Pesantren, with their unique pedagogical approach rooted in Islamic tradition and a strong emphasis on religious studies, present distinctive challenges and opportunities for English language learning that are only beginning to receive sustained scholarly attention.

A growing body of research has documented the position of English within pesantren life. Muhammad and Purbani (2024) found that despite pesantren increasingly adopting English as a target language, Arabic still dominates daily multilingual practice because of its close association with worship and religious identity. Similarly, Sabiq et al. (2022) showed that pesantren students' religious beliefs shape their attitudes toward English, at times positioning it as secondary to religious knowledge. Sari (2023) and Murtadho (2023) further describe structural and motivational challenges in pesantren English instruction, including limited instructional time and low student motivation stemming from curriculum priorities. Beyond the pesantren context, Diep et al. (2022) demonstrated that cultural familiarity and foreign language anxiety jointly influence Indonesian EFL learners' speaking performance, while Abrar et al. (2022) identified specific sources of speaking anxiety among Indonesian English-education students, including fear of negative evaluation by peers. These studies, however, tend to examine either the general Indonesian EFL context or isolated aspects of pesantren life, leaving a gap in research that specifically investigates how overlapping cultural factors politeness norms, religious identity, and linguistic ecology combine to shape pesantren students' willingness and ability to speak English.

This gap is significant because existing literature on English speaking difficulties often foregrounds linguistic barriers, general pedagogical methods, or socio-economic factors, while the unique cultural ethos of the pesantren encompassing religious values, social norms, and traditional communication patterns remains under-explored in relation to English speaking skills. Sani and Romadhoni (2025) argue that pesantren students construct a localized "Pesantren English" identity that blends Islamic values with global English use, suggesting that cultural adaptation, rather than simple linguistic deficiency, is central to understanding how these students engage with English. Likewise, Andriani (2024) illustrates that English proficiency among santri (pesantren students) is strongly mediated by social

agents such as family, kyai (religious teachers), and the pesantren community itself, rather than by individual motivation alone.

Building on this foundation, the present study addresses the following scientific novelty: it treats cultural barriers to English speaking not as a single linguistic obstacle but as a multidimensional construct spanning psychological factors (such as fear of judgment, consistent with the foreign language anxiety framework of Horwitz et al., 1986), sociological factors (such as politeness norms and willingness to communicate, drawing on MacIntyre et al., 1998), and institutional factors (such as curriculum priorities and language ecology within the pesantren, as documented by Sofi and Jenks, 2026). By integrating these three dimensions within a single qualitative case study, this research seeks to provide a deeper and more holistic understanding of the cultural dynamics that either hinder or facilitate English speaking among pesantren students in Cirebon. Accordingly, this study aims to explore the cultural barriers that affect the English speaking ability of Islamic boarding school students in Cirebon, and to examine how these barriers are experienced and negotiated by the students themselves, in order to inform more culturally sensitive and effective English speaking pedagogy for this unique student population.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative approach with an interpretative phenomenological design to gain an in-depth understanding of the cultural barriers faced by pesantren students in Cirebon in developing their English speaking skills. This design was chosen because it allows for contextual exploration, captures rich participant perspectives, and identifies nuances that quantitative methods might miss, by focusing on understanding and interpreting participants' lived experiences. The researcher, serving as the main instrument, aimed to explore the meanings participants constructed from their experiences, resulting in a holistic understanding of the phenomenon under study.

The subjects of this study were ten (10) active pesantren students in the Cirebon area, West Java, who had studied English for at least one year and were willing to openly share their experiences. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, with the final number determined by data saturation, following the recommendations for purposeful sampling in qualitative and mixed-method research described by Palinkas et al. (2015). The research was conducted in a selected pesantren located in the Cirebon area, aligning with the study's specific geographical focus.

Data were collected through several triangulation techniques to ensure richness and validity. The primary method was semi-structured interviews exploring students' perceptions and experiences regarding cultural barriers, which were audio-recorded and transcribed for

analysis. Participatory observation was also conducted directly within the pesantren environment, particularly during English learning activities, to observe verbal and non-verbal behaviors, with field notes diligently maintained. Documentation, such as English lesson syllabi and pesantren social norms guidelines, provided contextual and supportive information. A supplementary short survey was administered to all ten participants to gather additional descriptive perspectives on perceived barriers, supporting rather than replacing the qualitative findings. Auxiliary instruments, beyond the researcher as the human instrument, included an interview guideline, a digital notebook for field notes, and an audio recorder.

The qualitative data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke (2019). The analysis involved systematically transcribing all interviews and field notes into textual form, followed by repeated reading for thorough familiarization. Significant units of meaning were then identified and coded, leading to the development of broader themes. These themes were subsequently reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the data and maintained internal coherence, before being presented in the final report supported by direct excerpts from participants' accounts.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative findings, the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba, as discussed in Creswell and Creswell (2018), were applied. Credibility was established through data triangulation (interviews, observation, documentation, and survey insights) and member checking with participants. Transferability was achieved by providing a rich, in-depth contextual description of the pesantren setting. Dependability was ensured through the systematic creation of an audit trail, and confirmability was reinforced by the same audit trail, demonstrating that the findings were grounded in the data rather than in researcher bias.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Research Results

Survey Statement	Yes (%)	No (%)	Related Barrier Theme
Uncomfortable speaking English for fear of being seen as arrogant by friends	90%	10%	Norms of politeness
Afraid of violating cultural or religious norms by speaking English	0%	100%	Norms of politeness
Perceive the pesantren environment as unsupportive of daily English use	60%	40%	Immersion environment
Ever reprimanded by a teacher or friend for using English too often	0%	100%	Immersion environment
Prefer Indonesian or regional language even when	100%	0%	Language

able to speak English			dominance
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Source: Supplementary survey data, 2026.

Through reflexive thematic analysis of the interview, observation, and documentation data supported by the descriptive survey results in Table 1 four main themes were identified as significant cultural barriers to English speaking among pesantren students in Cirebon: (1) norms of politeness and unwillingness to make mistakes, (2) dominance of Arabic and regional/Indonesian languages in daily communication, (3) lack of a supportive English immersion environment, and (4) perceptions of the role of English relative to curriculum priorities.

As shown in Table 1, a substantial majority of respondents (90%) reported discomfort speaking English out of concern that they would be perceived as arrogant by peers, while none reported fear of violating religious or cultural norms specifically. This pattern, echoed in the interview data, suggests that the barrier is primarily social rather than doctrinal: students worried about how classmates would judge them, not about transgressing pesantren values. Regarding the immersion environment, 60% of respondents felt the pesantren setting was less supportive of everyday English use, yet all respondents (100%) reported that they had never been explicitly reprimanded for using English indicating that the discouragement students perceive is implicit and social rather than institutional. Finally, all respondents (100%) reported a habitual preference for Indonesian or regional languages even when capable of speaking English, reflecting the dominance of existing linguistic habits within the pesantren's daily communication ecology.

B. Discussion

The finding that politeness norms and fear of peer judgment rather than religious prohibition constitute the dominant barrier aligns closely with Horwitz et al.'s (1986) foundational conceptualization of foreign language classroom anxiety, particularly the dimension of fear of negative evaluation. Students in this study were not anxious about the language itself so much as about how using it would be socially received, a pattern also documented among Indonesian EFL learners more broadly by Abrar et al. (2022) and Diep et al. (2022), both of whom found that social and cultural familiarity strongly predict speaking anxiety and performance. In the pesantren context specifically, this finding extends Sabiq et al.'s (2022) observation that religious identity shapes language attitudes: whereas Sabiq et al. emphasize the doctrinal dimension of language choice, the present findings suggest that among Cirebon pesantren students, social conformity pressures operate somewhat independently of, and perhaps more strongly than, religious concerns.

The dominance of Arabic and regional languages in daily communication corroborates Muhammad and Purbani's (2024) description of an "imbalance case" in pesantren multilingualism, in which Arabic retains primacy because of its association with worship and

religious identity, even as English is formally taught. This is consistent with Zein's (2019) broader observation that English in Indonesia coexists uneasily with Bahasa Indonesia and regional languages within a crowded multilingual ecology, and it echoes Murtadho's (2023) finding that pesantren bilingual programs frequently struggle against entrenched daily-use habits despite institutional support for additive bilingualism.

That all respondents reported never being explicitly reprimanded for using English, despite most perceiving the environment as unsupportive, points to what might be termed an implicit rather than explicit discouragement structure. This resonates with Sari's (2023) account of structural challenges in pesantren English teaching, where limited exposure and scheduling constraints rather than active prohibition reduce opportunities for authentic practice. It also aligns with the situational model of willingness to communicate proposed by MacIntyre et al. (1998), which holds that L2 communication is shaped less by fixed traits than by immediate social and contextual conditions; in this case, the absence of low-pressure, informal opportunities to speak English appears to suppress students' willingness to communicate even without any formal sanction.

At the same time, the data revealed important counter-currents to a purely deficit-oriented reading of these barriers. Several participants indicated that teachers who made English practice compulsory, or who created a non-judgmental classroom atmosphere, notably increased students' confidence consistent with Effiong's (2016) finding that classroom social factors are a primary lever for reducing foreign language anxiety. Moreover, participants generally did not see English as conflicting with pesantren values; some viewed it as a means of broadening horizons and even connecting Islamic knowledge to a global audience, a view consistent with the identity-blending "Pesantren English" described by Sani and Romadhoni (2025) and with the strategies of contextualized, faith-compatible English learning documented by Sofi and Jenks (2026). Participants also reported greater ease speaking English in informal contexts, mirroring Andriani's (2024) account of how social agents teachers, peers, and kyai can activate students' English use as a form of social and academic investment when the context feels safe rather than evaluative.

Taken together, these findings indicate that cultural barriers in the pesantren context are not solely linguistic but multidimensional, involving interrelated psychological (fear of evaluation), sociological (politeness norms and peer perception), and institutional (curriculum priority and language ecology) factors. This understanding is essential for designing culturally sensitive and effective English speaking interventions in pesantren settings, and it suggests that reducing the perceived social risk of speaking English through supportive teacher practices and low-stakes informal opportunities may be more impactful than curriculum changes alone.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore the cultural barriers faced by Islamic boarding school students in Cirebon in developing their English speaking skills, employing a qualitative

phenomenological approach complemented by a supplementary survey involving ten participants. Four primary cultural barriers were identified as significantly hindering English speaking proficiency among these students: norms of politeness and unwillingness to make mistakes, dominance of Arabic and regional/Indonesian languages in daily communication, lack of a supportive English immersion environment, and perceptions of English's role relative to curriculum priorities.

The findings consistently show that fear of peer judgment, rather than religious prohibition, is the dominant barrier, with 90% of survey respondents reporting discomfort speaking English due to fear of being seen as arrogant. The dominance of Arabic and regional languages in daily communication was strongly supported by all respondents preferring these languages even when able to speak English. While perceptions of environmental support were mixed, qualitative data underscored the scarcity of spontaneous, low-pressure English interaction, and the complete absence of reported explicit reprimand suggests that discouragement operates implicitly rather than explicitly. Overall, this study concludes that cultural barriers to English speaking in the pesantren context are multidimensional, involving interconnected psychological, sociological, and institutional factors, and that simply focusing on linguistic aspects is insufficient to address them.

The implication of this study is the necessity for designing English speaking interventions in pesantren that are linguistically sound and deeply sensitive to the unique social and cultural context of this environment. Strategies that account for politeness norms, create a safe and non-judgmental space for practice, increase authentic and informal language exposure, and connect English use to students' religious and personal goals are likely to be more effective in empowering pesantren students to speak English with confidence. This research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of English language acquisition in faith-based educational settings, offering insights that may extend to comparable Islamic and other religious educational institutions beyond Cirebon.

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