English Language Teaching in Islamic Boarding School: Navigating the Digital Revolution

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ARTICLE INFO

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ABSTRACT

Teaching English in Islamic boarding schools or traditional Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia faces significant challenges due to technological developments. In recent years, technology has changed how people learn, communicate, and interact. This study aims to investigate how English teachers teach English in the digital era when Islamic boarding school regulations prohibit students from bringing gadgets. Qualitative study was used in this study by using interview and observations as data collection technique. The findings of this study revealed that the educational pattern at *pesantren* fulfilled the characteristics of a modern *pesantren* with formal and informal education system. English teachers do not refuse the existence of technology but do not use it as the primary method of learning in the classroom. The learning method is still based on teacher-centered and lecture-based learning methods. Some challenges in teaching English are traditional learning methods, monotonous classroom atmosphere, lack of teacher competence, and lack of teaching sources. The conclusion emphasizes the need for teacher training, improved teaching methods, and teaching sources.

INTRODUCTION

The education system in *pesantren*, or Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia, is renowned for adapting and integrating traditional Islamic teachings with modern educational practices. Islamic education in *pesantren* traditionally emphasizes three core concepts: *tarbiyah*, *ta'lim*, and *ta'dib*. *Tarbiyah* emphasizes character building and morals, *ta'lim* focuses on providing knowledge, and *ta'dib* focuses on fostering behaviour and character. Therefore, there is a movement towards innovation in teaching methods and learning media as a response to advances in science and technology. Based on Nikmatullah as educators, policymakers, and stakeholders, their role is crucial in shaping the future of Islamic education and ensuring its relevance in the digital era (Nikmatullah et al. 2023).

The *pesantren* curriculum has undergone significant reforms in recent years to improve its quality and relevance in the current educational landscape. Modern Islamic boarding schools often integrate components of the national education system into their curriculum, allowing students (*santri*) to obtain skills and information relevant to further education and the workforce (Yusuf et al. 2024). This integration reflects a broader transformation where *pesantren* are no longer limited to religious

knowledge but also prepare students to face contemporary challenges through general education (Wicaksono et al. 2024).

A crucial aspect is modernizing the *Pesantren* curriculum to include digital components aligned with the 4.0 industrial revolution requirements. Recent research shows that *pesantren* must reconsider and adapt their educational systems, especially in the instruction of the English language Teaching (Darwis 2013; Muzakky et al. 2023). So, improvements in teaching methods are needed to increase the effectiveness of English language education in Islamic boarding schools. Several schools, like *Pesantren Darussalam*, have properly established a systematic English curriculum that develops from basic to advanced levels, ensuring that students enhance their communication abilities while dealing with their religious studies (Muiz 2023; Umar et al. 2025).

Thus, the use of digital platforms for learning has been emphasized in various studies. Innovative methods such as interactive podcasts and technology-based evaluation have been used to enhance traditional methods of learning yellow books (classical Islamic texts) (Dwi Andriani 2024; Sholihah, Ritonga, and Desrani 2025). Besides that, digital storytelling effectively increases students' speaking abilities across many educational tiers and promotes communication and language acquisition (Nair and Yunus 2021). These modifications signify a comprehensive development in culture inside the *pesantren*, where leaders emphasize developing an atmosphere conducive to creativity while following their educational objectives (Rahayu 2020).

The journey towards digital integration has its challenges. There is much concern over maintaining basic principles intrinsic to *pesantren*, particularly when close interactions decrease in digital environments (Kurniawan and Puspitasari 2025; Setiorini et al. 2024). Educators emphasise character education to maintain traditional Islamic values amid technological developments (Nisa, Aimah, and Mohd Fakhruddin 2024). Furthermore, limited infrastructure and varying levels of digital competence among teachers are obstacles that need to be overcome for the success of curriculum reform (Ali & Rudi, 2023; Paramansyah et al., 2024)

According to the explanation above, the modern pesantren education system is undergoing a multifaceted transformation driven by digital advances. Therefore, *pesantren* must integrate contemporary educational practices, especially in Teaching English, so that there is still a balance between the *pesantren* curriculum and technological developments. The researcher is interested in investigating how English teachers teach English in the digital era when gadgets are limited in Islamic boarding school.

METHODS

This study emphasizes a qualitative research approach, which is according Bogdan and Taylor, qualitative research involves generating descriptive data from individuals' experiences or observable behaviors, which is can be captured in written or spoken. Qualitative research essentially focuses on producing descriptive data aims to comprehend the essence of given phenomenon.

Data collection techniques are done through interviews and classroom observation. The participants were two English teachers from one of the Islamic Boarding Schools in East Java. Interview sections were conducted with English teachers to gain perspectives on the teaching-learning process regarding the digital era and the media used. Classroom observations were conducted to monitor English class teaching activities and the learning environment. During this session to understand the real classroom practice. Data collection procedures were conducted over four weeks.

This research used Miles and Huberman's analytical framework, which includes three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion formulation. Data reduction involves selecting data relevant to the study goals. The display of data clarifies the revealed information, while conclusion formulation occurs after comprehensively comprehending the collected data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
English Language Teaching in The Pesantren or Islamic Boarding School in the Digital Era

The education system in the boarding school that is the object of this research combines religious education and formal and non-formal education. The *pesantren's* curriculum combines the Ministry of Religion curriculum and the boarding school curriculum, namely *Kulliyatul Mu'alimin / Mu'alimat Al-Islamiyah* (KMI). Formal education includes Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTs) or junior high school and Madrasah Aliyah (MA) or senior high school. At the MA level, there are three specializations: Science, Social Studies, and Vocational Tailoring.

In addition, this *pesantren* also requires students (*santri*) to use two languages, which are two weeks of Arabic and two weeks of English. Therefore, English is included in the daily language during the two-week English week. However, Arabic is more dominant because most lessons are in Arabic. The only lessons that use English are English lessons, grammar, and dictations, while most others are in Arabic. In two weeks of English week, it is expected that students can use a short time to apply English. Therefore, students apply English, not just understand it. Because English Language Teaching (ELT) in *pesantren* significantly benefits from institutional and environmental support that correlates with English learning with students' religious and academic objectives, reinforced by innovative pedagogical methodologies and fully involved language application (Sholihah et al. 2025).

Based on the interview results, one teacher, A, stated that English teaching was conducted formally in and outside the classroom as an everyday language. Therefore, the *pesantren* created formal and informal English programs that fit the pesantren setting (Dwi Andriani 2024). According to teacher A, mastering English is an obligation to be understood and mastered because it is an international language (Nurhartoto et al. 2022).

Despite the requirement to use English during English week, many students are not brave enough to speak English. Based on observations and brief interviews with some students, they said they are more comfortable using Arabic than English. Because the students fear mispronouncing English, they keep quiet during English week. In addition, they also said they were afraid of being punished for not using English.

By mastering English, students are expected to be able to prepare for the future after leaving the *pesantren*. That's why *pesantren* not only teaches about religion but also as preparation when graduating from the study. Nawesea's English learning approach integrates academic language training with pragmatic entrepreneurship education, enhancing students' proficiency in using English within business and entrepreneurial contexts (Rahayu 2020). By mastering English, students can develop their potential once they graduate.

In this digital era, technology-based learning quality improvement has been widely applied in various schools, and some pesantren have also implemented it. Based on the results of interviews with the two English teachers, they are not completely using technology in learning and teaching. Although students are not allowed to bring gadgets, teachers can still access the internet to find teaching materials. Based on Nikmatulla et al in their research the research indicates that *Pesantrens'*

digitalization represents an evolution rather than a disruption, enabling them to preserve their vital societal function while adapting to modern technological innovations (Nikmatullah et al. 2023).

Teacher centered is teaching system in pesantren where teachers are challenged to be the center of the class. Because the teachers uphold the phrase:

"الطريقة اهم من المادة ,والمدرس اهم من الطريقة ,وروح المدرس اهم من المدرس نفسه"

"*At thariqah ahammu minal maddah, wal mudarris ahammu minat thariqah, war ruhul mudarris ahammu minal mudarris nafsihi.*"

Meaning: The method is more important than the material, the teacher is more important than the method, and the teacher's soul is more important than the teacher him/herself.

This phrase reminds teachers that the teaching method is more important than the material being taught, while the teacher as a teacher is more important than the teaching method. The teacher's soul is more important than themself because if there is no spirit in teaching, students will not receive any technique well.

The teacher employs direct teaching or lecture-based learning methods based on the interview. Although still using the old learning method, the students can participate in the lesson without difficulty based on the results of classroom observations. Only a few students seemed unfocused during class; when the researcher asked why, they said they were not so interested in the topic of discussion at that time or preferred to review lessons outside of class hours.

Based on the Wicaksono et al. research result, Lecture-based learning, complemented by question-and-answer discussions, allows teachers more flexibility to adapt lessons to students' learning needs and supports interaction through Q&A sessions (Wicaksono et al. 2024). Through Q&A sessions, the teacher can find out how well the students understand the material presented by the teacher. The teacher encourages students to ask questions. So that the teacher can provide other examples or explain the material in a way that students can easily understand.

Based on the interview results, the teacher who became the participant of gaining the data for the research stated that with direct teaching or lecture-based learning, the teacher feels more familiar with her students and can encourage students to try to ask or answer questions given by the teacher. Based on classroom observation, on classroom engagement, the classroom atmosphere is moderately active. Some students are involved and some are not, focusing instead on listening to the teacher's explanations. The teacher asked questions, and the students answered in groups or individually. In the classroom, groups co-operated and some worked individually.

The use of context-responsive pedagogy in English language instruction (ELT) in Indonesian Islamic boarding schools. This methodology involves adapting English instruction to the *pesantren* setting's specific cultural, religious, and social background (Madkur aaet al., 2024). Learning based on the context surrounding students makes it easier for students to understand the context of the lesson being taught. The use of language is based on how students can master and implement it in their daily activities. The teacher presented real examples in the *pesantren* or with the help of physical tools other than technology such as whiteboard, pictures, and teacher's gesture that had been prepared before the teaching and learning process.

Challenges for Pesantren's English Teacher

Based on interview and classroom observation with the English teachers of Islamic boarding school, there are some challenges identified in digital era.

a. Due to *pesantren*-based education, applying more modern English teaching methods experiences several obstacles, such as a lack of infrastructure in each class, so teachers must try to deliver material that students can receive correctly and adequately. Some previous studies have also suggested improving infrastructure to increase student learning motivation (Arif et al. 2024; Muzakky et al. 2023).

b. The learning method is teacher-centered, thus causing a monotonous classroom atmosphere; as a result, some students who are not so interested in English are increasingly unwilling to listen to the teacher's explanation in class.

c. There is a need for improvement in teacher training. One of the teachers stated that sometimes teachers feel that students cannot receive the material delivered well.

d. The materials in the textbooks are mostly short stories that are outdated. So, there is a lack of literacy. Teachers have to find pictures or give examples that match the era. Meanwhile, students have difficulty with unfamiliar vocabularies, so they need to look it up in the dictionary or ask the teacher. One of the teachers said: "I use pictures that match the material being taught. Students describe the picture and guess the one shown by the teacher. The teacher also uses body gestures to explain the material and storytelling because the material in the textbook is more in the form of stories. I often tell stories while showing pictures so that students can better understand the material I convey."

CONCLUSION

This study investigates how English teachers teach English in the digital era when Islamic boarding school regulations prohibit students from bringing gadgets. The findings of English language teaching in the digital era are: 1) the *pesantren* education system is divided into formal and informal, which requires students to master two languages, Arabic and English, 2) technology is used as a source of additional learning, and 3) learning methods that still use teacher-centered and lecture-based learning, resulting in a monotonous classroom atmosphere.

Then, some challenges were also found from the results of interviews and classroom observations, such as 1) teaching methods that still use teacher-centered and lecture-based learning, 2) lack of classroom engagement because students mostly listen and write notes, 3) lack of competence of English teachers so that sometimes teachers are not confident when delivering lessons in class, and 4) lack of teaching resources so that teachers sometimes have diffculties when delivering learning materials.

With the advancement of science and technology, the researcher hoped that this research result could be a reference for further research because education is a dynamic field and continues to adapt to the needs of society.

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