

An Islamic Boarding School English Language Ecology Framework for Sustainable Communication: A Case Study at Pesantren Darul Falah

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ABSTRACT

Sustaining fluent English communication within Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) often presents a tension between intensive foreign language acquisition and religious-cultural preservation. Adopting the Modern Islamic Boarding School curriculum (*Modern Kulliyatul Mu'allimin Al-Islamiyyah*/MMI inspired by KMI Gontor and refined by institutions such as Daar El-Qolam), this qualitative case study investigated the linguistic ecosystem at Darul Falah Islamic Boarding School to construct the Islamic Boarding School English Language Ecology Framework (IBS-ELEF) for sustainable communication. Data were collected over six months through in-depth interviews with 12 key informants (language directors, teachers, and student language officers), participant observation across daily campus language zones, and institutional document analysis. The findings revealed that sustainable English usage is driven by three interconnected ecological pillars: (1) a Structural-Institutional Pillar utilizing bi-weekly language rotations, morning vocabulary injections (*mufrodat*), and peer-led enforcement (*Pengurus Bahasa*); (2) a Socio-Religious Pillar re-contextualizing English as a medium for global Islamic advocacy (*Da'wah-English*); and (3) an Affective-Environmental Pillar fostering a low-anxiety, collective learning culture. These dimensions coalesce into the IBS-ELEF model, demonstrating that language sustainability relies on harmonizing institutional discipline, religious identity, and peer support rather than enforcing Western cultural assimilation. Practically, IBS-ELEF offers a contextually grounded, scalable blueprint for non-Western, religious-based ESL/EFL institutions striving to cultivate globally communicative learners while safeguarding their core values.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the era of global interconnectedness, foreign language proficiency particularly in English has become a vital competency for graduates of Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) in Indonesia [10], [11]. To respond to global demands while maintaining traditional values, many modern *pesantren* have adopted the *Modern Kulliyatul Mu'allimin Al-Islamiyyah* (MMI) educational model, an adaptation pioneered by the iconic *Kulliyatul Mu'allimin Al-Islamiyyah* (KMI) system of Pesantren Darussalam Gontor and refined by institutions such as Daar El-Qolam [6], [7]. This system relies on a total immersion environment, mandating the use of English and Arabic in daily communication [2], [30]. However, sustaining long-term, natural English communication within religious boarding environments presents unique challenges [28]. The acquisition of a foreign language often clashes with local socio-cultural norms and potential anxieties regarding cultural assimilation [14], [29], [40]. Viewing language learning strictly as an isolated classroom activity frequently fails to foster sustainable oral fluency; therefore, understanding the *pesantren* environment through a language ecology lens where physical, social, institutional, and psychological factors interact becomes an urgent necessity [4], [5], [8].

Existing literature on English language learning in Islamic boarding institutions has extensively explored pedagogical strategies, curriculum integration, and code-switching phenomena [3], [7], [23]. Prior studies have focused primarily on classroom-based instructional methods, teacher strategies, or structural discipline mechanisms used to enforce language rules [2], [12], [17]. Furthermore, several scholars have examined code-switching and borrowing behaviors among students (*santri*) as pragmatic communication strategies in daily interactions [20], [23]. Others have analyzed public speaking training (*muhadharah*) as a primary tool for building student confidence and communicative competence [21]. These studies collectively confirm that structured immersion systems significantly contribute to vocabulary expansion and basic speaking skills among students [26], [28].

Despite these valuable insights, a significant empirical and theoretical gap remains in the literature [13], [39]. Most previous studies treat language learning in *pesantren* as a series of isolated pedagogical interventions or mechanical discipline enforcement, neglecting the dynamic, living ecosystem in which language use occurs [4], [8]. Few studies have examined how institutional policies, religious identity construction, peer governance, and affective security interact simultaneously to sustain language practice outside the formal classroom [10], [18], [19], [34]. Moreover, there is a lack of a comprehensive, contextually grounded theoretical framework that models how modern *pesantren* specifically those operating under the MMI/KMI system like Darul Falah can sustain English communication without compromising their core socio-religious identity [13], [37].

To address this gap, this qualitative case study investigates the holistic linguistic ecosystem of Darul Falah Islamic Boarding School [1]. By exploring the interactions between language governance, socio-religious values, and student social dynamics, this study aims to develop the Islamic Boarding School English Language Ecology Framework (IBS-ELEF) [4], [8], [39]. To guide this inquiry and align the empirical findings with theoretical development, the study addresses two overarching research questions:

1. RQ1: How do institutional policies, peer governance, socio-religious values, and affective security interact within the *pesantren* ecosystem to shape and sustain daily English language practices outside the formal classroom? [2], [10], [12], [18]
2. RQ2: In what ways can an integrated ecological framework (IBS-ELEF) model the balance between fostering global communicative competence and safeguarding the core socio-religious identity of non-Western, religious-based boarding institutions? [13], [37], [39], [40]

By systematically addressing these questions, this study seeks to offer a sustainable, context-appropriate conceptual model for non-Western, religious-based EFL/ESL institutions striving to cultivate globally communicative learners while safeguarding their intrinsic religious identity [36], [39], [40].

2. METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to gain an in-depth, holistic understanding of the linguistic ecosystem within its natural, real-life context at Darul Falah Islamic Boarding School. A case study approach is particularly suitable for exploring complex social interactions, institutional dynamics, and behavioral patterns within bounded systems [1]. In this research, the bounded system encompasses the daily communicative practices, structural policies, and socio-religious environment of a modern Islamic boarding school implementing the MMI system.

To guide data collection and thematic development, the operational scope was categorized into qualitative investigation domains (equivalent to qualitative construct dimensions and indicators), as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Qualitative Domains, Focus Areas, and Observational Indicators

Qualitative Domain	Focus Area / Sub-Construct	Empirical Indicators
Structural-Institutional Domain	Institutional Language Policy & Governance	• Enforcement of bi-weekly language rotation schedules (English-Arabic). • Implementation of daily morning vocabulary injection (<i>mufrodat</i>). • Operational authority and monitoring routines of student officers (<i>Pengurus Bahasa</i>).
Socio-Religious Domain	Cultural & Ideological Integration	• Incorporation of Islamic terminology into English discourse (<i>Da'wah-English</i>). • Contextualization of English in religious rituals (e.g., <i>muhadharah</i>, sermons). • Perceptions of English as a tool for global Islamic advocacy rather than Westernization.
Affective-Environmental Domain	Psychological & Social Atmosphere	• Prevalence of language anxiety during peer communication. • Nature of disciplinary corrections (punitive vs. constructive/educational). • Peer solidarity (<i>ukhuwah</i>) and shared vulnerability in communicative errors.

The study was conducted at Darul Falah Islamic Boarding School. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that informants possessed direct experience and strategic insight into the school's language ecology, policy formulation, and daily enforcement. A total of 12 key informants participated in this study, consisting of 2 Language Advisory Directors (*Pembina Bahasa*), 4 Senior Language Teachers (*Ustadz/Ustadzah*), and 6 Student Language Section Officers (*Pengurus Bahasa*). Data were collected over a six-month period using in-depth semi-structured interviews, participant observations across campus functional zones, and institutional document analysis. Data were analyzed systematically using thematic analysis, and data trustworthiness was established through triangulation and member checking.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Results: The Core Ecological Pillars of IBS-ELEF

The qualitative findings reveal that the English-speaking environment at Darul Falah Islamic Boarding School operates through a highly structured yet dynamically adapting social ecosystem. Based on thematic analysis, three major ecological pillars emerged, forming the

foundation of the proposed **Islamic Boarding School English Language Ecology Framework (IBS-ELEF)**. Table 2. Emergent Themes and Ecological Pillars of IBS-ELEF

Core Ecological Pillar	Sub-Themes & Components	Operational Manifestation at Darul Falah
1. Structural-Institutional Pillar	• Total Immersion Mandate	• Bi-weekly language rotation (English/Arabic) • <i>Pengurus Bahasa</i> student monitoring
	• Peer-Enforcement System	• Morning <i>Mufrodat</i> (Vocabulary) distribution
2. Socio-Religious Pillar	• Lexical Injection Routine	
	• <i>Da'wah</i> -Oriented Purpose	• Public speaking in English (<i>Muhadharah</i>) with Islamic themes
3. Affective-Environmental Pillar	• Hybrid Islamic-English Registers	• Usage of Islamic honorifics within English sentences
	• Contextualized Ritual Integration	
	• Safe Peer-Learning Spaces	• Peer-to-peer correction rather than top-down punishment
	• Corrective Feedback Mechanisms	
	• Cultural Identity Validation	• Minimizing "English anxiety" via group solidarity

1. The Structural-Institutional Pillar

The foundation of the English language ecology at Darul Falah relies on a rigorous institutional structure derived from the MMI system. The school enforces a strict bi-weekly language rotation policy between English and Arabic. Key components of this pillar include morning vocabulary distribution (*mufrodat*) after Subuh prayer and peer-led governance (*Pengurus Bahasa*) where senior students manage daily language discipline.

2. The Socio-Religious Pillar (Contextualizing English within Islam)

Darul Falah resolves the ideological tension between learning a foreign language and preserving Islamic identity by re-contextualizing English as a tool for universal Islamic advocacy (*Da'wah*). Students synthesize Islamic terminology with English sentence structures (*Da'wah-English*) and demonstrate this during weekly public speaking training (*Muhadharah*).

3. The Affective-Environmental Pillar

Sustainability in communication is reinforced through a supportive affective environment. Darul Falah fosters a strong collective identity (*ukhuwah*) that mitigates language anxiety. Since errors are shared collectively among peers, psychological fear of making mistakes is substantially reduced, and disciplinary sanctions are transformed into educational opportunities (e.g., essay writing or public speaking).

3.2 Synthesis of the IBS-ELEF Framework

The IBS-ELEF framework synthesizes the core operational mechanics of the *Modern Kulliyatul Mu'allimin Al-Islamiyyah* (MMI) system—pioneered by KMI Gontor and refined by institutions like Daar El-Qolam—into three holistic ecological dimensions [7]. Rather than treating the MMI system merely as a set of rigid disciplinary rules, IBS-ELEF conceptualizes it as an integrated language ecosystem where institutional structures, socio-religious values, and affective

security function synergistically.



3.3 Discussion

The empirical evidence indicates that sustaining second language acquisition within a religious boarding environment requires moving beyond isolated pedagogical practices toward a holistic ecological perspective. The structural-institutional dynamics observed at Darul Falah corroborate Spolsky's language policy framework [16] while extending the recent work of Effendi and Al-Bantani (2024), who emphasized the critical role of decentralized administrative leadership in MMI curriculum adaptation [7]. Furthermore, delegating supervisory authority to student officers (*Pengurus Bahasa*) aligns with Kurniawan and Lestari's (2024) insights on peer-led governance in residential schools [20]. Their research demonstrates that peer monitoring transforms language enforcement from a restrictive external pressure into an internalized social norm, significantly strengthening long-term communicative compliance [20].

Crucially, the socio-religious contextualization embedded in the IBS-ELEF framework offers a viable solution to foreign language anxiety and cultural resistance. The emergence of *Da'wah-English* reinforces the findings of Nezia et al. (2025) and Alfalathi (2025) regarding identity negotiation in non-Western educational contexts [14], [15]. Rather than experiencing subtractive bilingualism where foreign language mastery diminishes native cultural values *the santri* engage in additive, ideologically aligned language appropriation. By positioning English as an instrumental medium for global Islamic outreach (*Da'wah*), the institution eliminates the cognitive dissonance typically linked with adopting a foreign language. This outcome expands upon Karaman and Arslan's (2024) socio-cultural framework [8], proving that language sustainability is optimized when target linguistic tools directly support a community's core ideological objectives.

Finally, the affective-environmental dimension provides vital explanatory power regarding language anxiety management within immersion environments. Recent studies by Rahmadianti (2025) and Rahmadira et al. (2025) highlighted that anxiety-ridden educational settings severely impede oral fluency and induce relational withdrawal [17], [18]. The IBS-ELEF model addresses this challenge through peer solidarity (*ukhuwah*) and constructive disciplinary practices. Instead of instilling fear, corrective measures are structured as collaborative learning opportunities (e.g., *muhadharah* performances). This supportive peer ecosystem substantially lowers the affective filter, reinforcing contemporary insights in socio-emotional learning (CASEL, 2023; Apranda, 2025) that psychological safety and emotional autonomy serve as indispensable foundations for sustained communicative competence [19].

CONCLUSION

This study established the Islamic Boarding School English Language Ecology Framework (IBS-ELEF) based on a qualitative investigation at Darul Falah Islamic Boarding School. The framework proves that sustainable English communication in religious boarding institutions does not require cultural assimilation into Western norms. Instead, sustainability is achieved by integrating language practice into daily institutional routines, aligning language goals with religious values, and fostering a peer-supported, low-anxiety environment. The IBS-ELEF model provides an adaptable roadmap for Islamic educational institutions seeking to develop globally competent,

bilingual students while maintaining their core religious identity.

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