



Exploring the role of language policy in facilitating multilingual communication among pesantren students

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This study investigates the daily life of a student navigating a multilingual language policy at *Pesantren Progresif Bumi Sholawat*, an Islamic boarding school in East Java. It aims to explore how the use of multiple languages, primarily English, supported by Japanese, Arabic, and Javanese, shapes the student's communication, identity formation, and emotional adaptation. Utilizing a qualitative methodology with a narrative inquiry approach, the study draws on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasizes social interaction and cultural tools as the foundation of language acquisition. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed using thematic narrative analysis. The findings show three key aspects, First, students experience both cognitive and emotional tension while adapting to the English-only policy. Second, support from peers and teachers serves as crucial scaffolding that helps them build confidence and overcome language anxiety. Third, students gradually form a hybrid identity that integrates *Pesantren* values with global communication competence. This research contributes to the field of language policy by foregrounding student voices, affective experiences, and practical directions for enhancing multilingual practices in Islamic boarding schools.

Keywords: multilingual language policy, Islamic boarding school, narrative inquiry, sociocultural theory, language identity

INTRODUCTION

In today's increasingly interconnected world, languages serve as vital tools that unite people from diverse cultural and belief backgrounds. Students within multilingual learning contexts, such as international Islamic boarding schools, stand at the forefront of this global trend. For example, *Pesantren Progresif Bumi Sholawat* in Sidoarjo, East Java, implements multiple languages, such as Spanish, Japanese, German and French, in its language training programs, in addition to English, which students are required to use daily communication. The institution also offers extracurricular language clubs that strengthen its multilingual education model. Its "English Day" policy requires *santri* (Islamic boarding school students) to speak only English on weekdays even during routine *pesantren* activities after-school hours. This approach reflects the *pesantren's* attempt to align with global multilingual education practices and promote linguistic diversity as a form of intercultural competence.

Despite the institution's emphasis on learning multiple foreign languages, students often face considerable challenges. The linguistics demands of adapting the intensive use of English pose significant barriers. Previous research has noted emotional and cognitive stress as

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a recurring issue in such context. [Chadafi \(2024\)](#), in her study at *Pondok Pesantren Mambaus Sholihin*, Gresik, identified that rigid English policies, coupled with low motivation and conventional teaching methods, can hinder students' language acquisition and communicative competence. Moreover, the teacher's role as a language policy implementer is crucial to the successful implementation of language policies in the classroom.

Furthermore, multilingual education can induce cognitive and emotional stress, especially when students must manage several languages simultaneously without sufficient pedagogical support. Research by [Abdurrizal et al. \(2022\)](#) emphasized the central role of teacher agency in the effective implementation of multilingual education policies in Islamic boarding schools. Their study revealed that teacher's beliefs and capacities significantly influence how language policies are enacted in classrooms, thereby affecting students' engagement and language proficiency. In a related study, [Yuliani et al. \(2023\)](#) examined the implementation of English Zones in modern Islamic boarding schools and found that students' resistance to implementing English outside the classrooms was a major obstacle. They suggested that activities such as foreign language debates and guided discussions could better prepare students for global communication. Overall, these studies indicate that institutional language policies in Islamic schools must strike a balance between structural enforcement and affective-pedagogical support to ensure successful multilingual education.

However, while previous studies have examined pedagogical and institutional aspects, few have explored how students personally experience the emotional and identity tensions that arise from living within multilingual policy environments. This gap becomes particularly salient in Islamic boarding schools, where language, culture, and religion are deeply intertwined. [Cenoz and Gorter \(2020\)](#) assert that the coexistence of multiple language systems in a classroom necessitates instructional practices that acknowledge and build on students' linguistic repertoires rather than suppress them. Without adequate scaffolding, language learning may become a struggle for survival rather than an empowering process. In *pesantren* settings, this dynamic is further complicated by religious expectations and community norms that shape how students internalize language rules.

The context of *pesantren Progresif Bumi Shalawat* is especially relevant, as it illustrates Indonesia's broader efforts to promote multilingual and global citizenship skills. Nevertheless, the implementation of multilingual policies in *Pesantren* remains underexplored compared to secular schools and universities. [Norton \(2013\)](#) emphasizes that language learning is closely linked to identity and investment, suggesting that learners may feel alienated when language policies fail to reflect their lived experiences.

This research draws primarily on [Vygotsky's \(1978\)](#) sociocultural theory as the theoretical foundation. According to Vygotsky, learning occurs through interaction, collaboration, and cultural participation within a community. He asserts that language and cognitive development originate in social communication and later become internalized as

individual thought. Central to this theory is the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which posits that students learn more effectively when guided by teachers or more capable peers. This concept is particularly pertinent in the context of multilingual *pesantren*, where the language learning process unfolds within a complex social environment shaped by religious values, institutional practices, and peer relationships. By applying this framework, the present research examines how a student navigates institutional language policy, constructs linguistic identity, and manages emotional and social challenges in everyday life at *Pesantren Progresif Bumi Sholawat*.

The need to adapt to this shift has emerged alongside the global emphasis on intercultural communication skills, multilingualism, and global citizenship. *Pesantren* are well positioned to cultivate these attributes through a comprehensive approach to education. However, this potential can only be realized through the careful planning and implementation of effective language policies. The findings of this study aim to assist educators and policymakers in developing more contextualized, inclusive, and responsive language policies. In multilingual educational settings such as *pesantren*, such policies are essential for fostering the mastery of 21st-century competencies. Recent research shows that *Pesantren* in Indonesia increasingly adopt multilingual strategies to strengthen students' global communication skills while maintaining religious identity ([Gunawan, 2025](#); [Madkur, 2025](#); [Rahman, 2023](#)). These initiatives reflect broader trends in the transformation of language policy within Southeast Asian faith-based education systems ([Bhatt, 2025](#)).

This study addresses a clear research gap: despite growing attention to multilingual education in Indonesia, limited research explores how *pesantren* students experience language policies in their daily lives. It connects the micro-level experience of a *santri* with broader discussions on multilingualism, identity, and affect in Islamic education. Accordingly, this study investigates students' experiences with the multilingual language policy, leading to the following research question: How does a *santri* experience navigate the multilingual policy in *Pesantren Progresif Bumi Shalawat*, particularly in relation English use? This research seeks to explore the firsthand experiences of a *santri* in engaging with the multilingual language policy, focusing particularly on the everyday use of English and its effects on communication, identity, and sense of belonging within the *Pesantren* context.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design with a narrative inquiry approach to explore a *santri* lived experience in implementing a multilingual language policy at *Pesantren Progresif Bumi Shalawat*. The qualitative design was chosen since it allowed for the exploration of the subjective meanings' individuals construct within specific sociocultural context ([Creswell & Poth, 2018](#)). Narrative inquiry, as described by [Clandinin and Connelly \(2000\)](#), foregrounds the temporal, personal, and social dimensions of human experience. A single-case study design was intentionally

selected to enable an in-depth exploration of the participant's linguistic and emotional journey. The participant represented a typical yet information-rich case, providing detailed insights into how institutional multilingual policies are lived and experienced in everyday life. In narrative inquiry, depth of story and contextual understanding are prioritized over breadth and generalizability. Grounded in [Vygotsky's \(1978\)](#) Sociocultural Theory, this research envisions language acquisition and adjustment as mediated by social interaction and cultural tool, while also shaped by institutional and religious dimensions of *Pesantren* life.

One *santri* was purposively selected based on three criteria: 1) at least two years of residency in the *Pesantren*, 2) active participation in language policy practices such as "English day", and 3) the reflexive ability to articulate personal experiences in depth. Data were collected over a period of four weeks (May-June 2025) by utilizing semi-structured, in-depth online interviews conducted via Zoom, each lasting approximately 60-90 minutes, accompanied by field notes and the researcher's reflective journal. Rather than pursuing data saturation, this study valued narrative completeness and coherence.

The researcher conducted member checking to verify the accuracy of interpretations, comments, and agreements by returning the transcripts and thematic summaries to the participant. This technique enabled the participant to confirm the accuracy of the researcher's interpretation and provided an opportunity to clarify or elaborate on her experiences. This study prioritized credibility through member checking and researcher reflexivity rather than data triangulation, aligning with narrative inquiry's emphasis on personal meaning-making over factual convergence. The researcher maintained reflective engagement throughout the study by documenting emotional responses, interview contexts, and communication patterns, while striving to preserve interpretative sensitivity to the participant's narrative. Ethical considerations were carefully observed. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, and the participant was assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any stage. The study received ethical clearance from Faculty of Cultural Studies, Universitas Brawijaya.

The researchers also acted as a co-creator of meaning, guiding the storytelling process with empathy and reflexivity toward the participant's sociocultural context. The analysis employed a Thematic Narrative Analysis approach ([Braun & Clarke, 2006](#)) to identify salient points and significant themes within the participant's narrative, maintaining both chronological order and contextual coherence. This approach enabled a deep understanding of how multilingual language policies are experienced and internalized within the *Pesantren* context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Students' Experiences in Navigating Multilingual Language Policy at Bumi Sholawat Progressive Islamic Boarding School

This study employed a narrative inquiry approach to analyze the experiences of a student encountering and responding to

the multilingual language policy at *Bumi Sholawat Progressive Islamic Boarding School*. The findings show that this policy has a significant impact on the student's cognitive, affective, social development, as well as the formation of the student's linguistic and personal identity.

Initial Surprise and Feeling of Alienation towards the English Day Policy

The student explained that upon entering the *Pesantren*, she was surprised by the strict implementation of the English Day policy, which extended beyond the classrooms into everyday interactions. She described her experience as "like being thrown into a foreign place," expressing shock and alienation in response to the unfamiliar linguistic environment.

"I didn't know I would have to speak English outside of class too. I felt lost, like being thrown into a foreign place."

Interpretation: This illustrates an initial linguistic shock, in which the language policy was experienced as a sudden demand rather than a gradual adaptation process. The lack of early orientation contributed to emotional discomfort and uncertainty about how to function socially within the *Pesantren* environment.

Affective Tension and Psychological Barriers in Language Practice

The student reported feelings of embarrassment, fear of making mistakes, and anxiety when required to speak English. Although, she could formulate her thoughts in Indonesian, she often went "blank" when trying to express them in speaking.

"I could think in Indonesian, but my mind went blank when I tried to speak in English."

Interpretation: These emotional barriers reveal the affective dimension of language learning. The student's hesitation reflects not only linguistic limitations but also psychological vulnerability, an issue commonly observed in contexts where language policies are strictly enforced.

The Role of Peers, Teachers, and Independent Strategies in Language Adaptation

The student gradually adapted through peer support and teacher guidance. Practicing in small groups reduced her fear, and practical language input from teachers helped her use English in daily interactions.

"When I practiced in small groups, I wasn't scared anymore. And the teacher taught us useful sentences for daily use."

Interpretation: These experiences highlight how scaffolding from peers and teachers fosters language confidence. Informal support networks serve as a bridge between policy expectations and the student's actual communicative abilities, facilitating smoother adaptation to the multilingual environment.

Multilingual Challenges: Cognitive Overload and Emotional Exhaustion

In addition to English, the student also attended Japanese language classes and religious lessons in Arabic and Javanese. She described this experience as mentally exhausting.

"Sometimes it feels like my brain is being exercised all the time."

Interpretation: This demonstrates how multilingual learning environments can lead to cognitive overload when not supported by appropriate pedagogical strategies. Rather than feeling empowered, the student experiences continuous pressure to “switch” between language systems, resulting in emotional and mental fatigue.

Language, Identity, and Inclusion

The student shared that using English made her feel braver and more open. She saw English as a “neutral bridge” that connected her with peers from diverse linguistic backgrounds.

“When I speak English, I feel like a braver version of myself.”
“When we speak English, it feels fair. No one dominates. We can talk to anyone.”

Interpretation: These reflections reveal the process of identity negotiation and the role of language as a tool for social inclusion. English is perceived not only as a medium of self- expression but also as a shared linguistic space that fosters equality and connection among students from different backgrounds.

TABLE 1 | Summary of Emergent Themes and Representative Quotes

Theme	Description	Representative Quotes	Interpretation (Brief)
Initial surprise & alienation	The student experienced shock upon entering an enforced English-speaking environment	“I felt lost, like being thrown into a foreign place.”	Sudden exposure without adequate orientation led to early discomfort and feelings of alienation.
Affective tension	Emotional barriers such as anxiety and fear of making mistakes hindered English use	“My mind went blank when I tried to speak in English.”	Language anxiety emerged when the students are pushed beyond their comfort zone.
Peer & teacher support	Informal peers and teacher support networks facilitated language adaptation	“When I practiced in small groups, I wasn’t scared anymore.”	Scaffolding helped bridge the gap between policy expectations and the student communicative competence.
Initial surprise & alienation	The pressure of handling multiple language systems created cognitive and emotional strain.	“Sometimes it feels like my brain is being exercised all the time.”	Cognitive overload occurred in the absence of sufficient pedagogical support.
Identity & inclusion	English provided a means for self-expression and inclusive communication among peers	“When we speak English, it feels fair. No one dominates.”	English functioned as a neutral lingua franca that fostered equality and social connection among students.

The results in [Table 1](#) show that the multilingual language policy at *Pesantren Progresif Bumi Sholawat* operates within a complex social environment that extends beyond the technical aspects of language instruction. Language use shapes not only students’ communicative competence but also their mental well-being, social relationships, and identity constructions. These findings support [Spolsky’s \(2004\)](#) claim that language policy encompasses language management, language practices, and language ideology. However, this study extends that framework by demonstrating how these dynamics unfold within an Islamic boarding school setting, where religious values and social norms strongly influence language use.

Drawing on [Lantolf and Thorne's \(2006\)](#) emphasis on scaffolding and [Vygotsky's \(1978\)](#) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), this study reinforces previous research on the importance of social interaction in language learning. At the same time, it offers a new perspective by exploring the role of social support within the *pesantren’s* distinctive cultural context. Peers and teachers play a crucial role in helping students overcome language anxiety and build self-confidence. Unlike many classroom-based studies, this research reveals that scaffolding in a *pesantren* extends beyond formal instruction and is embedded in everyday institutional routines, such as informal conversations

during mealtimes or religious gatherings. This finding underscores that policy implementation is inseparable from the institution’s lived culture, making language adaptation both a linguistic and cultural process. Recent studies further demonstrate how institutional culture and religious values shape multilingual learning outcomes in *pesantren* contexts ([Ilyas, 2024](#); [Rahman, 2023](#)). This aligns with [Bhatt’s \(2025\)](#) argument that language policy in Islamic educational settings cannot be separated from socio-religious ideologies, as seen in how the *santri* in this study negotiate their linguistic and cultural identities.

A key tension identified in the narratives lies between identity construction and emotional alienation. Language barriers and occasional clashes between cultural values and international norms can lead individuals to feel emotionally isolated. However, over time, these challenges enable students to develop a hybrid identity that integrates global citizenship and multilingualism while remaining rooted in *Pesantren* values. This paradox supports [Norton's \(2013\)](#) concept that language involves not only improving linguistic ability but also exploring one’s social identity and future aspirations. Importantly, the findings challenge the dominant assumption that multilingualism is inherently empowering; in this context, empowerment depends on the inclusivity of institutional policies.

This study also deepens our understanding of the role of institutional language policy in shaping emotional experiences. Previous studies (e.g., [Abdurrizal et al., 2022](#); [Yuliani et al., 2023](#)) have emphasized teacher agency and student resistance, but they rarely investigate how such policies are experienced through students' emotional, social, and identity-based struggles. By centering student voices, this study offers a micro-level perspective on how language policies are interpreted, negotiated, and at times resisted within *Pesantren* contexts.

In the Indonesian context, *Pesantren* occupy a unique position as both religious and educational institutions. Unlike many secular multilingual programs, *Pesantren* language policies are closely tied to moral and spiritual expectations, raising the stakes for compliance. This connection helps explain why language anxiety can be more intense: students who struggle linguistically may not only feel academically inadequate but also socially and spiritually insufficient. This dimension remains underexplored in the literature on multilingual education, making this study a valuable contribution.

Furthermore, the findings carry practical implications for *Pesantren* administrators and policymakers. If language policies are to empower rather than exclude, they must be designed with sensitivity to students' affective and identity-related needs, not solely their linguistic competence. Orientation programs, gradual language exposure, and structured peer support systems could help mitigate early linguistic shock and foster students' confidence and well-being in a more sustainable manner.

Overall, this study provides a critical perspective on how multilingual language policies are lived, negotiated, and emotionally experienced by students in Indonesian *Pesantren*. Rather than focusing solely on policy enforcement, it emphasizes how students navigate the tensions between institutional expectations, individual identity, and peer relationships. The research methodology provides a nuanced understanding of how language policies are implemented and experienced at the micro level within *Pesantren* culture. By integrating sociocultural theory, language policy frameworks, and student narratives, this study extends existing research by revealing how institutional contexts influence the success or failure of language policy implementation in everyday educational practice.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that the multilingual strategy of *Pesantren Progresif Bumi Sholawat* extends its influence beyond linguistic boundaries. Three key findings emerged; first, the psychological stress associated with the simultaneous use of multiple languages, particularly English, as emphasized by the policy; second, the crucial role of peer and instructor support as a psychological foundation for fostering language confidence; and third, the emergence of a hybrid identity that allows students to integrate traditional *Pesantren* values with globally oriented aspirations as multilingual learners. As shown by [Gunawan \(2025\)](#) and [Madkur \(2025\)](#), similar tensions have been observed in

other *Pesantren* contexts, highlighting the need for inclusive and context-sensitive policy design.

This study makes a significant contribution to *Pesantren* language policy research by illuminating how students, as human beings, experience and respond to language policies as their direct targets. The findings hold important implications for *Pesantren* policymakers, teachers, and curriculum developers. Through a narrative inquiry approach, this study provides a rich qualitative understanding of the affective, social, and identity dimensions that are often overlooked in studies focusing solely on institutional-level policy analysis. In doing so, this article deepens the current understanding of how language policies both shape and are shaped by the everyday lives of students within these complex religious educational settings.

However, this study is not without limitations. It involved only one respondent from a single *Pesantren*, and therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to all *Pesantren* settings or the wider *santri* population. While the case-focused approach enriches the depth of analysis, it inevitably limits the breadth of perspective. Future research should involve larger and more diverse samples to identify patterns across different institutional contexts. Comparative analyses among *Pesantren* with varying language policies could also offer a broader understanding of the institutional, social, and cultural factors that shape the implementation and impact of language policies on students. In conclusion, this research underscores that language policy in *Pesantren* is not merely concerned with linguistic objectives, but also with identity formation, inclusion, and emotional well-being. Adopting a more holistic and empathetic approach to language planning will enable *Pesantren* to cultivate not only language proficiency but also student empowerment and a sense of belonging.

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Conflict of Interest Statement: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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