

ENGLISH LEARNERS' LITERACY PRACTICES IN PESANTREN EDUCATION 5.0: NEGOTIATING HYBRID IDENTITIES

PRÁTICAS DE LETRAMENTO DE APRENDIZES DE INGLÊS NA EDUCAÇÃO PESANTREN 5.0: NEGOCIANDO IDENTIDADES HÍBRIDAS

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Abstract

This study investigates the literacy practices of English learners in Pesantren Education 5.0 and how these practices shape the negotiation of hybrid identities. Pesantren, as a traditional Islamic boarding school, has undergone significant transformation by integrating digital literacy, global language exposure, and science-oriented curricula. Using a narrative inquiry approach, the research draws on interviews and students' reflective documents collected from three senior santri at Pesantren Sains Tebuireng. The analysis employs Holland et al.'s framework of figured worlds and Norton's concept of identity investment to trace how students negotiate between positional identities shaped by pesantren norms and figurative identities shaped by global English and digital culture. Findings reveal that learners' literacy practices extend beyond classroom tasks to include digital engagement, popular culture, and peer collaboration. These practices foster hybrid identities that blend Islamic values, scientific aspirations, and global language competence. The study highlights the complexity of identity construction in religious educational contexts during the digital era and emphasizes the role of literacy as both a site of struggle and empowerment. The implications contribute to reimagining Education 5.0 in pesantren settings, where English literacy can bridge local traditions and global futures.

Resumo

Este estudo investiga as práticas de letramento de aprendizes de inglês na Educação Pesantren 5.0 e como essas práticas moldam a negociação de identidades híbridas. O pesantren, como um internato islâmico tradicional, passou por uma transformação significativa ao integrar letramento digital, exposição à língua global e currículos orientados para a ciência. Utilizando a abordagem de investigação narrativa, a pesquisa baseia-se em entrevistas e documentos reflexivos produzidos por três santri do último ano no Pesantren Sains Tebuireng. A análise emprega o referencial teórico de "mundos figurados" de Holland et al. e o conceito de investimento identitário de Norton para rastrear como os estudantes negociam entre identidades posicionais moldadas pelas normas do pesantren e identidades figurativas influenciadas pelo inglês global e pela cultura digital. Os resultados revelam que as práticas de letramento dos aprendizes vão além das tarefas de sala de aula, incluindo engajamento digital, cultura popular e colaboração entre pares. Essas práticas fomentam identidades híbridas que combinam valores islâmicos, aspirações científicas e competência linguística global. O estudo evidencia a complexidade da construção identitária em contextos educacionais religiosos na era digital e enfatiza o papel do letramento como espaço tanto de luta quanto de empoderamento. As implicações contribuem



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para uma reimaginação da Educação 5.0 em ambientes pesantren, onde o letramento em inglês pode servir como ponte entre tradições locais e futuros globais.

Palavras-chave: *Práticas de Letramento em Inglês. Identidades Híbridas. Educação Pesantren 5.0. Investigação Narrativa.*

1 INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized world, the English language has permeated diverse educational contexts, including religious education settings. The spread of global English into traditionally non-English domains has raised questions about identity and literacy, especially in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) where Arabic and local languages long dominated. In Indonesia's *pesantren*, English was once peripheral, but it is increasingly recognized as important for global citizenship. *Pesantren Education 5.0* refers to the adaptation of these religious schools to the demands of the digital age (often called Society 5.0), integrating advanced technologies with human-centered learning. This paradigm emphasizes not only technical skills but also socio-emotional development, creativity, and global awareness. The convergence of global English with *Pesantren Education 5.0* creates a unique context for learners to form new identities that blend religious values with global literacies.

Research on language learning and identity has highlighted that acquiring a new language is not merely a neutral skill but an identity-altering process (Norton, 2013; Block, 2007). Bonny Norton (2013) argues that language learners invest in a target language with the hope of accessing imagined communities and possible future identities. Identities are understood as dynamic, multiple, and socially constructed (Weedon, 1987; Gee, 2001). Holland et al. (1998) add that identity formation occurs within figured worlds, socially and culturally constructed "as-if" worlds where individuals enact roles and negotiate positions. In the context of English learning, the figured world of a global English community can inspire learners to envision new roles (e.g. as cosmopolitan professionals or activists) beyond their immediate surroundings. At the same time, identity in language learning is a site of struggle, as learners negotiate power relations and seek the "right to speak" (Norton Peirce, 1995) in the new language. For instance,

learners in conservative or faith-based environments may grapple with tensions between religious identities and global (English-speaking) identities.

Similarly, literacy is no longer viewed as just an individual cognitive skill, but as a social practice intertwined with culture and ideology. Brian Street (1984) introduced the idea of literacy practices to emphasize “the social practices and conceptions of reading and writing” rather than autonomous, value-neutral skills. In Street’s ideological model, learning to read/write a language (like English) inevitably involves adopting certain values, identities, and power dynamics embedded in that language’s use. James Gee (1996) also conceptualizes literacy in terms of Discourses, ways of using language linked with identity. As Gee famously stated, “A Discourse is a sort of ‘identity kit’ which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write”. In other words, to become literate in a new language is to take on a new identity in a new community. These theoretical perspectives suggest that when *pesantren* students engage with English literacy, they are not only learning linguistic skills but also entering new “figured worlds” and negotiating who they are.

However, while a significant body of research has examined language learner identities in secular or Global North contexts, much less is known about learners in religious educational settings of the Global South. English learning in a *pesantren*, an Islamic boarding school environment, presents a complex interplay of language, identity, and ideology. Students must navigate between the Islamic ethos of their education and the global cultural content that English carries. Early studies have noted potential tensions, such as whether embracing English (often associated with Western/secular culture) might clash with Islamic values (Karmani, 2005; Yousef, 2012). Yet recent work indicates that many Muslim learners frame English not as a threat but as a tool for religious or social goals. For example, a study by Destari (2023) found Indonesian *pesantren* students developing a form of “virtuous investment” in English, seeing English proficiency as part of their duty and dakwah (religious outreach). This suggests that rather than a simple East-West clash, these learners may be hybridizing their identities, integrating global literacy practices into local religious frameworks.

Pesantren Education 5.0 provides a timely context to explore these dynamics. As *pesantren* modernize and incorporate technology and multicultural education to meet Society 5.0 challenges, they create spaces where students engage with global discourses. *Pesantren Sains Tebuireng* exemplifies such an environment. It is a “*pesantren* 5.0” that

blends traditional Islamic boarding school life with a science-oriented curriculum and emphasis on English and digital literacy. Unlike more traditional boarding schools, *Pesantren Sains Tebuireng* explicitly values bilingualism (English and Arabic) alongside religious learning. This environment enables what Homi K. Bhabha (1994) calls a “third space,” an in-between space where new, hybrid identities can emerge. In this third space, students can be devout *santri* (Islamic students) and global English users at the same time.

Research Gap and Objectives: There is a clear need for empirical research on how English learners in such modern *pesantren* negotiate their identities. How do they practice English literacy under institutional and ideological constraints? What identities do they craft at the intersection of local religious expectations and global language practices? Existing studies on identity and language learning have rarely examined the unique hybrid identity formation in Islamic boarding schools. To address this gap, the present study investigates the literacy practices of English learners in *Pesantren Sains Tebuireng* and how they negotiate hybrid identities as part of *Pesantren* Education 5.0. The objectives are: (1) to document the narratives of several students (*santri*) learning English in this context, (2) to analyze how their English literacy practices (e.g. reading, writing, speaking in various settings) serve as a medium of identity negotiation, and (3) to interpret these findings through the lenses of identity theory and literacy as social practice. Ultimately, this research aims to contribute a deeper understanding of how global English and local Islamic schooling coalesce in shaping learners' identities, offering insights for educators and researchers in applied linguistics, literacy studies, and religious education.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Identity and language learning

Contemporary applied linguistics views identity as central to language learning. Identities are not fixed traits but are socially constructed, multiple, and dynamic, emerging through interaction and discourse (Norton, 2000; Weedon, 1987). As learners acquire a new language, they often reconstruct who they are in relation to that language and its speakers. Norton's theory of investment (Norton Peirce, 1995; Norton, 2013) posits that learners invest in a language expecting returns in the form of symbolic and material resources, which in turn relate to their desired identities. For example, an

Indonesian student might invest effort in English to become a “global scholar” or a bridge to the international community. Norton introduced the concepts of imagined communities and imagined identities, learners envision themselves as part of a community of users of the target language, which can powerfully motivate their learning. These imagined identities (e.g. imagining oneself as a successful professional using English) shape how learners participate in class and beyond.

Adding to this, Holland et al. (1998) provide the concept of figured worlds to explain identity in practice. A figured world is a “socially produced, culturally constituted realm of interpretation” where certain characters and acts have significance. For instance, the figured world of a *pesantren* includes roles like the pious *santri*, the *ustadz/ustadzah* (teacher), etc., with associated behaviors and values. When a *pesantren* student enters the figured world of global English, perhaps via online media or English classes, they encounter new roles (e.g. fluent English speaker, global youth leader) that they might adopt. Identity, according to Holland et al., is formed in the space of authoring one’s self in such worlds, improvising with available cultural tools to make meaning of who one is. Learners in our context juggle at least two figured worlds: the religious world of the *pesantren* and the cosmopolitan world that English represents. Identity work involves figuring how to be in both worlds simultaneously, often creatively blending them.

Another pertinent notion is that identity is relational and positional (Davies & Harré, 1990). In a classroom or community, how a learner perceives themselves (“I am not an English person” vs. “I am a bridge to the world”) depends on social positioning. If peers or teachers regard speaking English as “cool” or alternatively as “pretentious,” the learner’s identity will be negotiated accordingly. Power is embedded in this process (Bourdieu, 1977; Norton, 2000). Learners may struggle for legitimacy, for instance, a shy *santri* must overcome the fear that speaking English will be seen as betraying humility or piety. As Norton and De Costa (2018) note, identity construction in language learning always occurs in contexts of power and ideology, affecting learners’ agency to speak or be silent.

In summary, identity in language learning is a fluid, context-dependent construct. Key theoretical pillars for this study are: (a) identity as multiple, evolving, and tied to social contexts (including imagined future contexts); (b) the learner’s investment in English as an investment in a new identity or community; and (c) identity negotiations as navigations of power and positioning. These ideas will help interpret how *pesantren*

students conceive of themselves while learning English, for example, whether they see English as aligning with or threatening their identity as devout Muslims, and how they reimagine themselves (perhaps as global Muslim scholars or Muslimah activists) through English.

2.2 Literacy as social practice

This study also draws on the New Literacy Studies (NLS) framework, which views literacy not just as reading and writing ability but as social practice (Street, 1984; Gee, 1990; Barton & Hamilton, 1998). In this view, literacy practices are shaped by the social and cultural context, and they carry the norms and values of that context. Street's (1984) ideological model of literacy contends that every act of literacy is embedded in an ideology, a set of beliefs about knowledge, identity, and power. Thus, learning English literacy means engaging with the ideologies associated with English (e.g. concepts of modernity, individualism, or Western norms). At the same time, learners bring their own cultural and religious ideologies to bear on how they use English. Rather than a neutral skill, literacy becomes a site of negotiation: whose values will prevail, and how can literacy be used for one's own purposes?

Brian Street (1984) coined the term literacy practices to capture both behavior and conception: "the social practices and conceptions of reading and writing". In our context, examples of literacy practices include a student reading an English young adult novel in secret, writing a speech for a competition, or translating an Islamic text into English. Each practice involves not only technical decoding or encoding of text but also a purpose, a community, and an identity. For instance, a student writing an English speech in a contest is asserting an identity as a competent bilingual individual; a student translating a Quranic verse into English on social media might be performing an identity as a dakwah messenger to a global audience.

James Paul Gee further elaborates how literacy links to identity through his concept of Discourses (with a capital D). A Discourse is like an identity toolkit that combines language with ways of acting, interacting, believing, and valuing. To be literate in a Discourse (say, academic English) is to embody a certain identity ("academic scholar") with particular behaviors. Gee notes that adopting a new Discourse can be challenging, one must often undergo an apprenticeship, and partial participation can mark

one as a “pretender” in that community. In a *pesantren*, students already inhabit a Discourse of *santri* (with its own literacy, e.g. reading Arabic texts, writing notes in Malay/Indonesian). When they learn English, they are essentially apprenticing into a new Discourse (e.g. global student). They might initially feel like outsiders or “less than fluent” members of that Discourse, leading to insecurity or resistance, as we will see with one participant. Mastery of the Discourse, indicated by things like confidently giving a speech in English or smoothly code-switching, signals a more stable identity within that literacy community.

Literacy as social practice also implies literacy events (Heath, 1983), concrete activities involving text (such as a speech competition, an online chat, or reading a novel), and the broader literacy practices that give those events meaning (like the norms of competition or the habit of reflective reading). In *pesantren* life, typical literacy events might be Quranic recitation circles or writing Arabic essays. When English literacy events (like an English debate or writing an email to an international pen-pal) enter this milieu, they may carry different expectations (e.g. more critical thinking, more casual style) that challenge or complement the existing practices. Students’ engagement in these events can mediate changes in how they see themselves. For example, writing a script for an international environmental competition (a literacy event) allowed one participant in our study to see herself as a capable English communicator for a cause, not merely a student fulfilling an assignment.

In sum, using the lens of literacy-as-social-practice, we will analyze how participants’ English literacy activities are intertwined with their identities and social worlds. The framework sensitizes us to observe not just what literacy skills students have, but how, where, and why they use English, and what meanings those uses have for them and their community. It also highlights power relations in literacy, whose literacy counts, which language is given status (e.g. Arabic vs English in the *pesantren*), and how students’ own values shape their adoption of new literacies. We anticipate that participants will appropriate English literacy in ways that align with their personal and religious goals, effectively creating hybrid literacy practices that serve both global and local ends.

2.3 *Pesantren* Education 5.0 and bilingual learning

The term Education 5.0 signals a shift in educational paradigms in response to rapid technological advancement and the ethos of Society 5.0. Society 5.0, a concept originating from Japan, envisions a human-centered society integrated with digital technology to solve social problems. In education, this translates to Education 5.0, leveraging technology for more personalized, creative, and character-focused learning. In Indonesia, policymakers and educators have started to frame reforms as moving from Education 4.0 to 5.0, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digital adoption. *Pesantren* Education 5.0 refers to how Islamic boarding schools are transforming under these influences: incorporating e-learning, fostering critical thinking and innovation, and preparing students for a digital, interconnected world while maintaining core Islamic values (Setiawan & Lenawati, 2020; Hidayat, 2021).

A hallmark of Education 5.0 is blended learning with technology combined with an emphasis on soft skills and global competencies. *Pesantren* that embrace this approach might implement smart classrooms, use online resources, encourage project-based learning, and invite cross-cultural exchanges, all unprecedented in traditional *pesantren* pedagogy. For instance, during the pandemic many *pesantren* had to shift to online classes, prompting both teachers and *santri* to adapt to digital literacy. At the same time, Education 5.0 retains a focus on human values: creativity, empathy, social responsibility. For an Islamic school, this is compatible with the moral education they prioritize; thus, *Pesantren* Education 5.0 can be seen as a synthesis of tradition and innovation.

Pesantren Sains Tebuireng exemplifies this synthesis. Founded in 2014 as part of the renowned Tebuireng boarding school, it merges religious education with scientific and international education. Its curriculum is a “unification” of national standards, international enrichment, and *pesantren* wisdom. Notably, *Pesantren* Sains (nicknamed Trensains) explicitly encourages bilingual proficiency. Unlike conservative *pesantren* that might restrict foreign languages, Trensains designates certain days for English use and others for Arabic. The *kyai* (*pesantren* leader) and teachers view English as a crucial skill for the modern era, not as a threat to Islamic identity. This institutional stance creates an environment where speaking English is normalized and even celebrated as part of being an educated Muslim. One could say that in Trensains, a new model of *santri* is

being cultivated: the science *santri* with global reach. Here, the identity of a good *santri* includes being conversant in English and technology, alongside Quranic knowledge.

Nevertheless, challenges remain in integrating Education 5.0 in *pesantren*. There is often a delicate balance to strike between embracing technology and preventing negative influences on students' moral discipline. Many *pesantren* impose strict regulations on gadget use to maintain focus and piety. As Fuady (2023) notes, *pesantren* in the Society 5.0 era face challenges requiring adaptive methods while still upholding core values. *Pesantren Sains Tebuireng*, for example, limits internet and smartphone access for students, requiring them to find structured ways to engage with digital content. This means that while Education 5.0 principles are present (e.g. e-learning sessions, digital science labs), they are implemented with caution and guidance.

For English literacy, *Pesantren* Education 5.0 implies more opportunities for exposure (through media, online materials, maybe correspondence with international partners) but also new rules and norms (like supervised internet use, English day policies). We expect that in such an environment, students develop adaptive strategies to learn, for instance, they might make the most of limited internet by downloading materials for later use, or they might utilize school-approved platforms to connect with English speakers. The mindset encouraged is that mastering English and technology is part of ibadah (effort in God's service) and khidmah (service to community) in the modern world. This supportive yet controlled ecosystem can be empowering: it provides resources and motivation, but students must also exercise agency and discipline to benefit from them.

In summary, *Pesantren* Education 5.0 forms the backdrop of this study as a space of transition. It is an educational milieu where hybrid practices flourish, e.g., a Qur'an memorization class might be followed by a robotics workshop; a student may recite Arabic scripture in the morning and join an English debate club in the afternoon. This hybridity at the institutional level enables the students' hybrid identities to take shape, as detailed next.

2.4 Hybrid identities in religious education

The concept of hybrid identity is crucial for understanding our participants. Hybrid identity refers to an identity that fuses elements from different cultural or social sources, often emerging in contexts of contact between traditions and modernity, or local

and global influences. Postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha (1994) introduced the idea of a “Third Space,” an in-between space where new cultural meanings and identities are produced. In the Third Space, individuals do not simply switch between two identities (e.g. “Muslim” vs “Westernized”) but create something new, a synthesis that accommodates both. For a *pesantren* student, the third space might be the zone of negotiation where being a faithful Muslim and being a cosmopolitan English-speaking youth intersect. Instead of seeing these as contradictory, the student in the third space finds a way to be both, for example, adopting Western learning methods or styles of self-expression that do not contradict core Islamic principles, or using English to further Islamic or humanitarian causes.

In religious education, identity has traditionally been framed in terms of faith, morality, and community belonging. Students are encouraged to internalize the identity of a pious believer. However, as global culture penetrates, these students also consume global media, wear global fashions, and aspire to global careers, leading to a form of cultural hybridity. Bhabha’s work suggests that this hybridity can be a site of empowerment: by merging aspects of two worlds, individuals can subvert hierarchies and create new narratives of self. For instance, a global Muslimah identity might emerge, a young Muslim woman who is rooted in her religious values yet fluent in global discourses on gender equality, education, and so forth. She might quote the Quran and Malala Yousafzai in the same breath, seeing no conflict in doing so. This is not a simple blend; it’s strategic and selective, what we might call strategic hybridity, consciously choosing elements from each side to forge a coherent self.

Research in Muslim educational contexts has documented such phenomena. For example, Lukens-Bull (2005) observed that Indonesian *pesantren* youth manage to be “orthodox but modern,” engaging with modern technology and ideas while maintaining traditional identity, a process he termed a “peaceful coexistence” of identities. Similarly, Indonesian scholars (e.g. Azra, 2015; Fachriyah, 2017) note that many *pesantren* graduates become bilingual and bicultural, comfortable in international settings without shedding their Islamic behavior. This suggests that hybrid identities are not only possible but perhaps common in reformed *pesantren* environments. Students learn to code-switch not just linguistically but culturally, for example, using different interaction styles with their *kyai* (full of honorifics and deference) versus with international friends on social

media (more egalitarian and informal), yet considering both authentically parts of themselves.

One theoretical implication of hybridity is the idea of multiple identities not as separate masks but as integrated. Bhabha argues that the self is constructed in the ambivalent space of the in-between. So a student might internally reconcile the teachings of Islam with the attitudes needed to succeed in a global workplace, seeing, for instance, discipline and integrity as common values in both. In this way, the student's identity becomes a hybrid that does not feel fragmented to them, praying five times a day and speaking English fluently become complementary facets of who they are. This is evident in how one participant, Huda, perceives English not as diminishing his faith but as embodying the *pesantren*'s vision of future Muslim scientists.

However, hybrid identities can also entail tensions. Not everyone in the community may accept hybrid expressions. A student enthusiastically practicing English might be teased for being “too Western” by peers, or a girl adopting a more global style might face pushback about modesty. These tensions require negotiation of legitimacy. The support of authorities (like progressive teachers) can legitimize hybridity: e.g., when a kyai endorses studying English for advancing Islamic causes, it gives students permission to blend those identities. Conversely, if authority figures are ambivalent or opposed, students might have to practice parts of their identity in more private spheres (e.g. secretly reading English novels or using VPN to access blocked content).

In our study, we anticipate seeing participants engage in identity negotiation strategies such as: compartmentalization (keeping certain practices separate by context), synthesis (finding shared values or parallels between domains), and reframing (explaining one identity in terms of the other). For example, a student might justify their English club activity by saying it helps them do dakwah in the future, thereby reframing a global practice in religious terms, effectively creating a hybrid justification that satisfies both identity components.

To ground this in theory: we use Bhabha's notion of third space and hybridity to interpret our participants' experiences of “being in-between.” Additionally, we consider Gee's idea of affinity spaces, communities where people share activities or interests (like an online fan forum or an MUN conference), which can provide neutral ground for hybrid identity play. A *pesantren* student participating in a virtual MUN is in an affinity space where their religious background might be invisible or moot, allowing them to experiment

with a more global identity. Such experiences can later be reintegrated into their self-concept.

In summary, the theoretical framework guiding this study is multi-faceted: it merges poststructuralist identity theory (identity as fluid, contested, and linked to power), literacy theory (literacy as social practice and identity work), and hybridity theory (third space and hybrid identities). Together, these perspectives enable a rich analysis of how English learners in a *pesantren* context practice literacy and construct identity. We now turn to the methodology used to investigate these phenomena.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design: narrative inquiry

This study employed a narrative inquiry approach to explore learners' experiences and identity construction. Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research methodology that centers on personal stories as a means of understanding how people make sense of their lives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It operates on the premise that humans are storytelling beings, we think, perceive, and remember in narrative form. For research on identity, especially in educational contexts, narrative inquiry is especially powerful because identity itself is often a narrative: individuals construct a story of "who I am" and "who I am becoming" (Riessman, 2008; Barkhuizen, 2011). By collecting and analyzing the participants' life stories related to language learning, we gain insight into the process of identity negotiation over time.

The design can be described as a narrative case study. Each participant in our study can be seen as a case of the phenomenon (English learning in *pesantren*) and their narrated experiences provide in-depth insights (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2018). Instead of large-scale generalizations, this approach yields "thick description" of contexts and events, illuminating how particular individuals navigate the broader social issue. Narrative case studies bridge the particular and the general: while rooted in individual stories, they allow researchers to discuss themes that resonate across cases (Barkhuizen, 2013; Benson, 2014). In our research, we have three primary cases (the three focal students), and we compare and contrast their narratives to draw broader implications.

In conducting narrative inquiry, we considered temporality, sociality, and place (Clandinin, 2013). Temporality means we look at events as part of a continuum, past experiences (e.g. childhood exposure to English), present actions, and future aspirations all matter. Sociality means we consider personal conditions (feelings, hopes) in tandem with social conditions (the *pesantren* setting, peer culture, etc.). Place refers to the concrete locations of events, for instance, a childhood home with internet access versus the technology-limited boarding school dorm, which as we will see made a difference in one's literacy practice. Attending to these dimensions helped situate each narrative in context.

We also drew on Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber's (1998) approach to narrative analysis. They outline different ways to read narratives, including holistic-content (looking at the story as a whole and deriving themes) and categorical-content (extracting segments across cases that relate to specific categories). In this study, analysis proceeded in two stages: first, we constructed each participant's story as a coherent account from their interviews and journals (holistic analysis). We noted key "turning points" or events that marked changes in their identity or attitude (e.g. a contest, a travel experience, a teacher's influence). Next, we performed a thematic analysis across the stories (categorical analysis) to identify common themes such as identity conflict, agency, hybrid identity strategies, etc. This combination allowed us to respect the uniqueness of each narrative while also addressing our research questions at a conceptual level.

Throughout, the research design maintained a poststructuralist stance towards identity: treating the narratives not as static biographies, but as performances and representations of self that can change and contain contradictions. We remained mindful that the act of telling their story to a researcher is itself part of participants' identity work, they choose how to present themselves. To mitigate biases, we encouraged participants to member-check the story write-ups and confirm that it reflected their experiences accurately (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3.2 Research context: *pesantren* sains tebuireng

The study took place at *Pesantren Sains Tebuireng*, in Jombang, East Java, Indonesia. *Pesantren Tebuireng* is a historic Islamic boarding school established in 1899, known for its role in religious education and as the home of prominent Islamic scholars.

The Sains (science) unit, founded in 2014, represents Tebuireng's innovative branch integrating mainstream science and English education into the traditional *pesantren* model. It consists of junior and senior high school levels (SMP and SMA/MA Trensains). Students (locally called *santri*) live in dormitories under close supervision and follow a daily schedule combining Islamic studies (Qur'an, Hadith, jurisprudence, Arabic, etc.) with the national curriculum subjects (math, science, languages). Classes are split into single-sex (the site has separate male and female campuses for some units).

Pesantren Sains Tebuireng was selected because it explicitly aspires to produce graduates who are religiously devout, scientifically literate, and globally communicative. According to school documents and staff interviews, the mission includes bilingual proficiency. The environment is thus richly bilingual: Arabic is prioritized as the language of religious discourse, and English is promoted as the language of scientific and international discourse. The school alternates language immersion days, for example, Monday, Wednesday, Friday might be "English days" and Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday "Arabic days" (with some variations). On an English day, students are encouraged (and sometimes required) to speak only English in daily interactions; conversely, on Arabic days they use Arabic greetings and conversation. This structured bilingual policy underscores that both languages are valued. As one senior teacher explained, "We want our *santri* to be able to discuss Qur'an and science in whichever language suits the context, Arabic for spiritual needs, English for worldly outreach." Notably, this policy and attitude differ from more conservative *pesantren* where using English informally could be frowned upon. At *Pesantren Sains*, English is seen as a "crucial skill" and part of being an educated Muslim in the 21st century.

The technological context is controlled. *Santri* do not freely use smartphones or have uncensored internet. There is a computer lab and certain hours or permissions when they can access the internet for assignments or supervised learning. During the COVID-19 lockdowns, remote learning tools were introduced (e.g. Zoom classes, e-learning modules), which was a new experience for both teachers and students. By 2025, when this study was conducted, the *pesantren* had retained some digital practices (such as digital library resources and occasional online guest lectures) but still enforced rules on gadget use. Many students get creative in using their brief home visits or computer lab sessions to download materials or connect externally. This scenario provided a natural

laboratory to observe how students pursue English literacy under resource and rule constraints, akin to “how do plants grow in a greenhouse environment”.

In sum, *Pesantren Sains Tebuireng* offers a unique blend of constraint and opportunity for English learners. The structured routine (dawn prayers, classes, mandatory study halls, communal activities) instills discipline and leaves limited free time, which can push motivated learners to manage time efficiently. The limited internet and device access pose challenges for practicing contemporary literacies (e.g. social media communication in English), yet the school compensates with institutional literacy events like competitions, English debates, speech and drama clubs. By situating our research in this context, we aim to highlight what English learning looks like on the ground in a cutting-edge *pesantren* that is navigating the Education 5.0 era.

3.3 Participants

Using purposive sampling, we selected three participants (pseudonyms: Nisha, Naura, Huda) who could provide rich narratives about learning English in the *pesantren*. All three were senior students in the 12th grade at MA (upper secondary level) *Pesantren Sains Tebuireng* during the study. They were chosen based on recommendations from English teachers as students who (a) showed notable engagement with English (inside or outside class), and (b) had interesting personal backgrounds relevant to language and identity (such as unique experiences or challenges). We also strove for diversity in gender and life history to explore a range of perspectives. Table 1 summarizes key demographics and background information of the participants:

Table 1

Key demographics and background information of the participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Background Highlights
<i>Nisha</i>	Female	18	From East Java; early digital exposure to English via YouTube; aspired to integrate science and English; active in speech contests.
<i>Naura</i>	Female	17	From Central Java; initially disliked English due to forced learning; later became active in global online forums (MUN) and balanced global ambitions with religious values.
<i>Huda</i>	Male	18	From West Java; lived in Germany in childhood (multilingual upbringing); passionate about science; emerged as an English club leader and academic role model in <i>pesantren</i> .

Nisha is a village girl from Jombang who grew up with unusually high exposure to smartphones and internet for her community. She started watching English YouTube videos as a child and developed an intuitive feel for the language before receiving formal instruction. Entering *Pesantren Sains*, she experienced a culture shock due to strict technology restrictions, but she leveraged school activities to continue engaging with English. Known as cheerful and creative, she joined speech competitions and aspired to a career merging her science education with international outreach (she often mentioned wanting to be an “international psychologist” working globally).

Naura hails from a devout Muslim family in Central Java. As a child, her mother pushed her into English courses and private schools, which bred resentment; she was what she herself called an “English hater” in elementary years. A health issue cut short her initial *pesantren* enrollment (she briefly attended *Pesantren Sains* for junior high), after which she moved to a public school. There she surprisingly found herself ahead in English, which boosted her confidence. During the pandemic she immersed herself in English media (like the Harry Potter series) and participated in Model United Nations and international webinars, sparking a transformation into a globally conscious youth. Naura’s identity journey is marked by tension between her global dreams (such as studying abroad) and the pull of family/religious expectations (preferring she stay local). She often reflects on how to be a “modern Muslimah” engaged with the world but maintaining her faith and cultural comfort.

Huda is the son of an Islamic scholar and had an international childhood due to his father’s studies. He spent formative years (ages 4 – 6) in Germany, learned German, then had to relearn Indonesian upon returning, effectively making him bilingual from a young age. In elementary school, he dutifully attended English classes but preferred playing football; only later did he realize the value of those early lessons. Huda chose *Pesantren Sains Tebuireng* influenced by his father’s wish to combine religion and modern education. Over time, Huda flourished; he became top of his class in English, won speech contests, and founded a Language Improvement Team to mentor younger students in English. Peers gave him nicknames like “Mr. Huda” and “Walking Dictionary” for his English prowess. Despite accolades, he remains humble and frames his achievements in terms of community service and making his parents proud. Huda envisions a future in global business or academia, and sees English as indispensable to that future.

Though few in number, these participants were intensely studied to unpack the nuances of their literacy practices and identities. All names are pseudonyms, and identifying details have been generalized to protect privacy. Each participant (and for minors, their parents) gave informed consent to share their stories. They were assured that the purpose was to learn from their experiences, and that there were no right or wrong answers in interviews.

3.4 Data collection

Data collection spanned approximately six months, combining multiple qualitative methods to capture a holistic picture of each participant's literacy practices. The multi-method approach ensured triangulation of data. For example, if Naura said in an interview that she “fell in love with English during the pandemic,” we had her actual social media posts (shared with us) that indicated increased English usage in that period, and we observed her confidently conversing in English during an online webinar. This convergence builds credibility in the findings (Patton, 2002).

3.4.1 *In-depth narrative interviews*

Each participant took part in a series of semi-structured interviews. The first interview focused on life history related to language (e.g. “Tell me about how you first encountered English” or “Describe significant moments in learning English”). Follow-up interviews probed emerging themes and clarified timeline events (“How did you feel when you moved to the *pesantren*?” “What changed in your approach to English during the pandemic?”). Interviews were conducted primarily in Indonesian (the participants' first language) to allow nuance, with occasional code-switching to English when participants quoted something or expressed a concept in English. Each interview lasted 60–90 minutes and was audio-recorded. They were later transcribed and, where necessary, translated to English for analysis. Participants were encouraged to speak freely; the interviewer used prompts like “Can you give an example?” or “How did that affect you?” to elicit detailed stories. The narrative style was emphasized: participants were nudged to recount events in sequence and reflect on their personal meaning (Chase,

2011). By the final interview, many participants said the process felt like “telling my life story,” which is exactly what we aimed for.

3.4.2 *Observation and field notes*

The researcher spent time on-site in *Pesantren Sains Tebuireng* observing daily activities (with permission from the school). Non-participant observation included morning assembly, an English extracurricular club session, evening study time in the dorms, and an English speech competition event. These observations provided context on how English is practiced in the school setting and how peers and teachers interact. Jot notes were made during observation, then expanded into detailed field notes each evening. For example, notes captured instances like “Observation: On English Day, overheard Huda helping a friend describe a science project in English. Friend seemed shy; Huda gently corrected pronunciation.” Such details helped triangulate interview data (e.g., Huda claiming he mentored peers was corroborated by seeing it happen). The researcher also took note of artifact use (e.g., the English posters on the wall, the way students had English labels on objects to memorize vocabulary).

3.4.3 *Documents and artifacts*

Participants were asked to share any personal documents relevant to their English learning. This included Nisha’s collection of speech certificates and the text of a speech she wrote, Naura’s short film script for the environmental competition (and a YouTube link to the film produced), and Huda’s reflective essay and a few pages from his journal where he jotted new English words. Additionally, the researcher was given access to some school records (with permission) such as competition results and could photograph some of the English motivational posters in classrooms. These artifacts provided concrete evidence of literacy practices. For instance, analyzing Naura’s film script (in English) showed how she expressed her voice on environmental issues, and we could discuss that in her interview. These items also enriched the narratives with specific examples (e.g., quoting a line from Nisha’s speech or describing Huda’s TOEFL practice test score).

3.4.4 Participant journals

To capture ongoing reflections, participants were given the option to keep a brief language learning journal for a few weeks. Only one participant (Nisha) consistently wrote entries, noting things like “Today I tried to talk to an American student during the school visit, it was scary but exciting.” Others occasionally wrote short pieces or sent the researcher voice notes about a significant event. While this was a minor data source, it added some contemporaneous insights and emotional tone that an interview after the fact might miss.

3.5 Data collection

The analysis followed a narrative and thematic approach as mentioned earlier. Concretely, the steps were:

1. **Transcription and Familiarization:** All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim (in the original language). The researcher read each transcript multiple times while listening to segments to capture intonation or emotion. Memos were written in the margins about initial interpretations (e.g., “Here Nisha’s tone shifts, excitement when talking about the doll,” or “Naura laughs, perhaps ironic, when recalling hating English.”).
2. **Constructing Narrative Profiles:** For each participant, we synthesized the data into a chronological narrative (often referred to as a “restorying” process in narrative inquiry). We integrated interview quotes, observational details, and artifacts into a coherent story that covered childhood, key school transitions, pivotal moments, and current perspectives. These narrative profiles were typically 5–8 pages each. During this phase we employed holistic-content analysis (Lieblich et al., 1998), focusing on each story’s development and identifying the content of key episodes. For example, in Huda’s profile, we highlighted the episode of his first speech contest and what it meant for his identity. We looked for a plot: for Nisha, a possible plot was “from consumer to creator” of language; for Naura “from resistance to embracement”; for Huda “from reluctant to champion”.
3. **Literacy as Identity Mediation:** instances where literacy practices (reading, writing, speaking English) directly contributed to shaping or expressing identity.

4. Constraints and Agency: challenges faced due to *pesantren* rules or personal barriers and how participants exercised agency to overcome them.
5. Strategic Hybridity: ways participants blended or balanced their religious identity with global/English identity, including any “third space” they created.
6. Changing Ideologies: shifts in their beliefs about English (from seeing it as useless or foreign to seeing it as valuable or even Islamic in some sense).
7. We also noted theoretical constructs manifesting in data (like “imagined community” e.g., Naura imagining the MUN community she wanted to join; or “figured world,” Huda seeing the *pesantren* as a world where he could be both pious and modern).
8. Member Checking and Validity: Drafts of the narrative profiles and the preliminary thematic interpretations were shared with participants for feedback. They confirmed overall accuracy and sometimes added clarifications. For instance, Nisha added that her initial fascination with English was also partly because her older sibling liked English music, a detail that we had missed but then integrated. This step enhanced the trustworthiness of our accounts. We also discussed emerging findings with an academic peer (another researcher in language education) to check that our interpretations were reasonable and not overly speculative. Peer debriefing helped fine-tune our themes (for example, splitting what we called earlier “identity negotiation” theme into more specific aspects like constraints/agency and hybridity).

The data analysis was thus inductive and iterative, moving between individual stories and cross-case themes, between raw data and theoretical concepts. Quotes from interviews are used in the Findings section to let participants' voices illustrate the points, with minimal editing (just filler words removed for clarity). Where quotes were originally in Indonesian, we provide English translations.

3.6 Ethical considerations

Ethical procedures were carefully observed in this study, given the personal and potentially sensitive nature of narrative research. Approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee prior to data collection, and we also sought informal approval from *Pesantren* Tebuireng's leadership, who were supportive.

Key ethical considerations included:

- **Informed Consent:** Participants (and their guardians, since two were under 18 at the start of the study) signed informed consent forms. These forms explained the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights (voluntary participation, withdrawal at any time, confidentiality). The researcher also explained in person, in simple terms, that participating meant sharing their experiences, but they didn't have to discuss anything they were uncomfortable with.
- **Confidentiality and Anonymity:** We assured that real names of participants, their family members, and any specific identifying details would be changed. The pseudonyms used in this report (Nisha, Naura, Huda) bear no resemblance to their real names. Additionally, the name of the *pesantren* is used with permission because it is relevant to context, but any mention of other individuals (e.g. a teacher or friend) is anonymized (we use generic terms like "an English teacher" or change the name to something like Ustadzah Ida as a pseudonym). All digital data (audio files, transcripts) were stored securely on a password-protected device. In write-ups, care was taken that even with the pseudonym, details are sometimes slightly altered or obscured if they might inadvertently reveal identity (for instance, the exact title of Naura's competition film is not mentioned, to avoid it being searchable to her).
- **Potential Risks and Comfort:** We recognized that telling one's life story could bring up emotional moments (e.g. Naura's struggle with a harsh teacher, or Huda's feelings of being different upon returning to Indonesia). The interviewer was sensitive to signs of discomfort and offered to pause or skip questions if needed. Participants were also told they could decline to answer anything. In practice, all three were enthusiastic to share and sometimes said it was cathartic to talk about these changes in their lives. We remained alert to power dynamics, the researcher (though an outsider) was older and perceived as a guest teacher figure; we emphasized that this was not an evaluation and that frank honesty (even if critical of the school) was welcome and confidential.
- **Reciprocity:** As a token of appreciation, after the data collection, the researcher held a free mini-workshop for interested students on tips for applying to international scholarships, an area all three participants were curious about. This was done to give back something useful and also to mitigate any feeling of

participants that they were “used” for data without benefit. All participants also received a summary of initial findings (in bilingual form) as they expressed interest in what we discovered from the study.

- **Integrity in Analysis:** While not a direct ethical issue, we strove for integrity by not cherry-picking data to fit a preconceived narrative. We remained open to “negative cases” or data that complicated our assumptions. For example, one might expect all *pesantren* students to initially have conflicts with English; however, Huda did not report any religious tension about learning English. We present that honestly rather than forcing a conflict narrative. This reflexivity ensures a fair representation of participant voices.

With methodology and ethics addressed, we now move to the heart of the paper: the Findings. These are organized as thematic narratives for each participant, illustrating their journeys (Nisha, Naura, Huda) in turn. Each narrative is followed by analytical commentary drawing out how their literacy practices and identity negotiations unfolded.

4 FINDINGS

In this section, we present the experiences of the three focal participants, each as a narrative highlighting key themes in their literacy practices and identity negotiation. Pseudonyms are used (as introduced earlier). We include direct quotes from interviews (in English translation where necessary) and descriptions of pertinent artifacts (e.g. competitions, personal items) to illustrate how each learner navigated the interplay of English literacy and identity in the *pesantren* environment. Following each narrative, we offer a brief analysis linking back to our theoretical framework.

4.1 Nisha: from digital consumer to bilingual *santri*

Nisha’s story exemplifies a journey from early informal engagement with English as a digital consumer to her eventual emergence as a confident bilingual *santri*. Growing up in a semi-rural Jombang village, Nisha had an atypical childhood for a *pesantren* girl: her family allowed (and even encouraged) some use of technology at a young age. By age 10, Nisha owned a basic smartphone, a privilege she fought for, seeing her older sibling use one. Through that device, a door to the English-speaking world swung open. She

recounts with nostalgia how she discovered YouTube videos of foreign teenagers reviewing toys, especially baby dolls:

“One of my earliest memories was watching toy review videos, particularly baby dolls, made by a blonde-haired teenager from abroad. I didn’t understand every word, but it was fascinating. I thought, ‘Wow, it’s so fun to be able to explain things in that language’... Through simple videos, like pretend-play with toy cash registers and Barbie dolls, I started picking up new words. I learned that ‘cloth’ meant clothing, ‘poop’ meant defecation, and ‘pee’ meant urination... English was no longer just a school subject, but something alive around me, something fun and unique.” (Interview 1)

For pre-teen Nisha, English was initially entertainment and a marker of coolness. She enjoyed the sounds of the foreign words and associated English with modern, attractive identities, “a symbol of a fun and modern global lifestyle” as she put it. Notably, she did not view English as instrumental (for exams or future jobs) at that stage. It was a consumption activity, akin to enjoying cartoons, that inadvertently planted seeds of vocabulary and pronunciation in her mind. English, to her, conferred a sense of distinction, she noticed that knowing a bit of English made someone “appear more intelligent and sophisticated”. Without formal guidance, Nisha was organically developing a positive attitude toward English, albeit on a superficial level (focusing on sounding cool rather than grammar or accuracy).

A turning point in this early phase came when Nisha’s father returned from a trip to the Philippines with the exact baby doll she had seen in the YouTube videos. The doll became a cherished artifact in Nisha’s literacy journey. She described the excitement of tangibly connecting with what was previously a virtual English experience:

“When he came home with it, I was beyond happy. I was the only one who had that doll in my village. I told my friends, like, ‘I have this doll that can eat and poop.’ I started picking up English terms from the YouTuber who reviewed the doll, like cloth, oh that means clothes... poop, oh that means going number two. So I began recognizing those little words. It was kind of funny.”

Owning the doll not only reinforced her vocabulary (now she really knew what “cloth diaper” meant, by using it on the toy), but also became a status symbol among her peers. She became the girl with the foreign doll, implicitly also the girl with some foreign language knowledge. Nisha leveraged this by sharing her new English words with friends,

turning herself into a mini “expert” in their eyes. This reflects what Brandt (1998) calls “sponsors of literacy,” here, a YouTuber and a plastic doll acted as sponsors introducing Nisha to English. Through this, English started shifting from a private amusement to a social identity marker for Nisha. She realized she “possessed new knowledge... her peers didn’t” and that gave her a certain position in her social circle. In narrative terms, Nisha at this stage was authoring an identity as a slightly worldly village girl who knows about cool things from abroad. This was an early form of identity negotiation where English featured as a resource for being unique.

Fast forward a few years: Nisha enrolls in *Pesantren* Sains Tebuireng for senior high school. The transition was dramatic. At the *pesantren*, rules were strict: no smartphones, no free internet. The very tools that nurtured her English were now largely cut off. “It felt like I had lost a part of my routine,” she said. Initially, Nisha experienced a sense of loss and frustration. She could no longer casually watch English vlogs or listen to Western music at will. Reflecting on that change, Nisha acknowledged the trade-off she had chosen:

“Yes, everything became restricted. At first, I was sad—like, I couldn’t enjoy watching the videos I wanted anymore. But then again, this was my own decision, so it’s the consequence of living in a *pesantren*. Access to phones or laptops is limited, and I had to accept that. I was sad at first, but eventually I came to terms with it.”

This quote highlights Nisha’s agency and maturity. She frames the restriction not as oppression but as a consequence of her choice, indicating a level of acceptance and understanding of the *pesantren*’s value system. Indeed, choosing a *pesantren* meant prioritizing structured learning and religious devotion over personal freedoms. Nisha’s identity as a *santri* (one who willingly abides by the *pesantren* discipline) was now in tension with her identity as a self-driven English learner. The first few months were tough: “I had to start doing things I had never done before, especially giving up my old habits of consuming English content”. She noted how stark the difference was from her previous public school where internet was readily accessible. This period can be seen as an identity reassessment: would she remain the digital, autonomous learner she once was, or would she fully conform to the *santri* mold?

In practice, Nisha began to adapt and find alternative pathways to maintain her English exposure, demonstrating resilience and agency. She focused on academic

avenues: paying more attention in English classes (which, in a science *pesantren*, were more intensive than average), volunteering for English-related extracurriculars, and making a point to speak English during designated “English days.” She also cleverly utilized her position as a top student to occasionally request privileges, like extra library time to read English books or permission to use the school computer lab for competition preparation. Nisha’s teachers recognized her enthusiasm and often supported her (for example, by lending her novels from their own collections). In this way, she converted what could have been a constraint into motivation, since casual entertainment was barred, she poured her energy into structured English activities.

A transformative moment for Nisha at the *pesantren* was when she decided to join an English speech contest in 10th grade, despite never having done something similar before. The contest was an online provincial-level speech competition hosted by a local university. Nisha had to pass an internal selection to represent her school. She said:

“In 10th grade, I joined an online speech competition by Unhasy. That’s when I first created a proper speech text. It was the first time I really tried to speak full English in a real way... I had to believe I could do it. Alhamdulillah, I passed the school selection. I then joined the competition. I was guided by my language teacher, Ustadzah Ida... She helped me. I then tried to write my speech and prepare everything.”

Preparing for this contest was a crash course in formal English literacy for Nisha: she had to write and deliver a speech entirely in English, a step up from the casual speaking she did with friends. It required mastering structure, rhetoric, and pronunciation. With help from Ustadzah Ida (herself a product of another bilingual *pesantren*), Nisha learned quickly. Though she did not win top prize, she did well enough and, more importantly, the process ignited a new self-perception. She began to see herself as someone who could create content in English, not just consume it. Winning her school’s selection and representing the *pesantren* gave her a sense of responsibility, “I represented my school... I felt my victory was not just for me but for my teachers too,” she noted. The contest thus solidified her identity as a bilingual *santri* who brings honor to her community. After this, she sought out more competitions and became a mentor figure for younger students interested in English, embodying the role of an English-language school ambassador.

Another interesting strategy Nisha employed to maintain her connection with global English was creating what she jokingly called her “third space.” During holidays or weekend furloughs home, she would binge-watch English content and engage online to “fill up” on the outside world, which she couldn’t access in the dorms. She explained that she did this discreetly and strategically: not to rebel, but to “develop her English skills in a natural way” without breaking rules. In essence, home became the space where she could be her “digital English self,” and school was where she was her “studious *santri* self.” Over time, the boundary between these selves blurred, she started to bring more of her global knowledge into school tasks (e.g., citing a YouTube science video in a class presentation), and she took her school-instilled discipline to her home study (making schedules for her holiday self-learning). This merging indicates that Nisha was successfully integrating her identities.

By her senior year, teachers and friends saw Nisha as a model of a modern *pesantren* student: devout in prayers and *diniyah* (religious studies), excellent in science, and fluent in English. Importantly, she too internalized this composite identity. She said in an interview, “I learned that being a *santri* isn’t only about wearing a sarong and reading kitab (Islamic books), it’s about discipline, responsibility, and also having a broad vision. I want to be someone who can integrate Islamic values with academic and global knowledge.” This statement reflects hybridity: Nisha sees no contradiction in being both a pious *santri* and a globally-minded English speaker; rather she sees it as essential to combine them.

Nisha’s literacy practices, from watching vlogs to writing speeches, mediated this identity development. Through them, she moved from passive consumption to active production, and from individual interest to communal contribution. She navigated institutional constraints by finding new avenues (competitions, academic usage) and maintained continuity with her past by designating times/spaces for digital engagement. Her story highlights the role of agency and identity investment: she continually invested effort in English because she envisioned a future self (perhaps an international professional or scholar) for whom both English and Islamic values are fundamental.

In summary, Nisha’s journey from a digitally empowered child to a disciplined yet bilingual *santri* demonstrates how an English learner can negotiate a hybrid identity. English for her transformed from a cool toy to a tool for personal growth and community pride. She entered *Pesantren Sains* as a wide-eyed YouTube girl and is leaving it as a

young woman who can gracefully switch between reciting an Arabic prayer and delivering a speech in English, confident that both are parts of who she is.

4.2 Naura: from resistance to global Muslimah

Naura's narrative is characterized by an initial resistance to English, followed by a dramatic turnaround that sees her embracing a role as a globally engaged Muslim young woman, what we term here a "global Muslimah." Her story sheds light on how negative early experiences can be overcome and how language learning intertwines with agency, ideology, and aspirations.

As a child, Naura did not choose English, English was thrust upon her. Coming from a relatively affluent, pious family, she was enrolled in an elite Islamic elementary school (SD Al Azhar) that followed an intensive Cambridge English curriculum. Additionally, her mother signed her up for an after-school English club as early as second grade. For Naura, these classes were a source of stress and discomfort. She felt out of place among peers who already spoke better English, and the extracurricular teacher (an expatriate who spoke very fluently) only highlighted her insecurities. One searing memory she shared was her internal protest: "Why should we even speak English here in Indonesia?". This rhetorical question summed up her sentiment that English was irrelevant and being forced on her.

Several factors reinforced Naura's aversion. She endured six years with a "killer" English teacher in elementary school, a teacher known for harsh discipline and scolding. Every class was anxiety-inducing, which over time conditioned Naura to dread English. Moreover, seeing friends in public schools who had a more relaxed approach to English made her feel her burden was unfair. Her mother's high expectations and extra tutoring only added pressure rather than helping. By the time she finished elementary school, Naura unabashedly identified as an "English hater." English to her symbolized stress, failure, and a lack of personal choice.

Interestingly, Naura's story involves two *pesantren* experiences. The first was short-lived: she entered *Pesantren Sains Tebuireng* for junior high (SMP) but left after two months due to health issues and inability to adapt to dormitory life. During that brief stay, her attitude toward English did not improve, if anything, juggling the bilingual environment while feeling homesick might have exacerbated her discomfort. After

withdrawing, she transferred to a public junior high near home. This move proved to be a turning point. At the public school, the academic standard for English was much lower than what she'd been through. In her very first English class, she found the material "very basic, almost identical to what she had learned in elementary school". For the first time in her life, Naura felt advantaged in English. She could answer the teacher's questions, even participate more actively than others. Her prior ordeal had, unbeknownst to her, given her a foundation that now set her apart. Mr. Haryanto, her new English teacher, even praised her understanding relative to peers.

This experience flipped a switch in Naura. She realized she was not actually bad at English, she had been in the wrong environment to appreciate her skill. Her self-confidence grew as she received good grades and positive feedback. This aligns with the idea of positioning: previously she was positioned (by self and others) as a weak student; now she was positioned as above-average. This change in social position allowed her to reposition her identity from "English-can't-do" to "maybe I can do this."

Naura's newfound confidence opened doors. A supportive arts teacher invited her to join a poetry musicalization contest in a local language, which they won third place. Though not directly English-related, this success primed her for further challenges. Soon after, an opportunity came to enter an international environmental short-film competition, where she had to write the script in English and produce a video. Naura jumped in, writing and directing the project. This was her first practical use of English for creative expression. She admitted that before, she always felt she was "wrong" in English writing, but in this project she found she could do it confidently. The process of scripting a film in English was transformative: "This was the first time she used English as a tool for expression, not just as a subject to be studied".

Completing the film gave Naura a sense of accomplishment and identity, she was now a content creator in English, something her younger self would never have believed. It "solidified her identity as an English learner" in a positive light. She described this period as shedding the old identity of "English hater" and realizing English is a valuable skill. In narrative terms, this was a classic redemption arc: the thing she hated became the thing she mastered and even enjoyed.

The timing of these events coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, which, ironically, accelerated her English journey. Stuck at home during lockdowns with online schooling, Naura began exploring digital content out of boredom. One day she got a

recommendation to watch the Harry Potter movies. She ended up binge-watching the entire series. This was notable because it was the first time she truly engaged with long-form English content for pleasure. She struggled with the British accents at first, but gradually got used to them. More significantly, she became intrigued by Emma Watson, the actress who played Hermione, and learned about Watson's advocacy for women's rights. This led Naura down a rabbit hole: she learned about the UN, UN Women, and eventually Model United Nations (MUN), a world of global youth engagement in English.

During the pandemic, Naura seized the opportunity of everything going virtual. She participated in various webinars and online discussions on global issues. One that left a deep mark was hearing a Jordanian activist speak about child marriage and women's rights in a seminar. For Naura, who had grown up in a sheltered environment, these stories were eye-opening. She realized English was her ticket to hear and be heard on important issues beyond her local context. She said (paraphrasing from her reflections): English stopped being just academic; it became my connection to humanity. She started seeing herself as part of a global community, an imagined community of activists, students, and change-makers who communicate in English. This was a profound shift: the language she once resisted now was empowering her to amplify values she cared about (e.g., environment, women's rights).

By engaging with MUN and similar activities, Naura's identity underwent re-imagination. She imagined herself not just as a participant but as someone who could contribute internationally. She began to picture a future where she might speak at global forums, or at least study abroad and join international networks. In her words, she "no longer wanted to be a mere observer of global conversations, but an active participant". English literacy thus became entwined with her sense of agency and purpose.

However, embracing a global identity also brought ideological contemplation. Coming from a devout family, Naura was conscious of ensuring her global aspirations aligned with her Islamic values. As she started planning for higher education, she gravitated towards Muslim-majority countries for study abroad. She extensively researched and found Qatar University to be a promising choice, excellent academics but also "Muslim-friendly" in terms of environment (halal food, prayer facilities, etc.). She had initially considered the UAE, but concerns about scholarships and perhaps cultural fit redirected her to Qatar. Furthermore, family influence played a role: her parents were

cautious about her going too far for undergrad, and an anecdote about her late grandmother advising she shouldn't live far away weighed on her mind.

Ultimately, Naura made a strategic decision: she would pursue undergraduate studies in Indonesia (keeping family comfort in mind) and consider going abroad for graduate studies. This decision is a prime example of negotiating hybrid identity with agency. She actively filtered what she took from the global sphere, for instance, she loved the idea of Western education's quality but filtered out aspects she found unaligned (like worry about discrimination or lifestyle mismatches such as toilet hygiene differences). She said she wanted to "filter the elements [of the global world] she found beneficial while maintaining her own values". In doing so, Naura demonstrated a keen critical literacy: she could engage with English-medium content yet critique and adapt it to her value system.

By the time of our last interview, Naura identified English mastery as the number one skill she must have for her future. She had gone from dreading English classes to reading self-development books in English for fun (finding them more natural than their Indonesian translations). She even noted that English sometimes felt "more comfortable" for reading certain concepts, an intriguing reversal of foreignness. Her daily practices included reading English articles, translating important information for her family, and participating in an online English study group. Each of these practices reinforced that English was now fully integrated into her self-concept.

We can encapsulate Naura's identity transformation as moving from a resistant learner to an empowered bilingual with selective alignment. She fashioned herself into a global Muslimah: a young woman who is worldly and articulate in English, but who consciously anchors herself in her faith and cultural norms. She used English literacy as a way to "direct her life in line with her principles and identity" for example, by accessing global knowledge that informed her choices (like where to study) and by voicing her views in international forums while wearing her hijab proudly (something she mentioned being initially nervous about but then embraced).

Naura's story highlights how negative language ideologies (English as useless or oppressive) can be replaced with positive, empowering ideologies when the context and purpose of learning shift. It underscores the importance of imagined identities in driving investment: once she could imagine herself as a cosmopolitan student/activist, she invested wholeheartedly in English (cf. Norton, 2013). It also reflects hybrid identity

negotiation: she did not simply adopt a Western identity; she merged global citizenship with her Muslim identity, showing agency in identity selection (choosing what aspects of each to adopt) and agency in learning (using the pandemic situation to her advantage). Her literacy practices, from writing a film script to binge-watching English media to translating scholarship info, were all stepping stones in reauthoring her identity from one extreme to another.

In summary, Naura's trajectory from saying "I hate English" to "English is my bridge to the world" is striking. It illustrates that identity and attitudes can pivot dramatically given new experiences, and how literacy (in this case, multiliteracy across media and writing) can serve as both a mirror (reflecting who she is) and a window (opening perspectives on who she can become). She stands as an example of a *Pesantren* Education 5.0 success story: a student who leveraged technology and global connectivity (webinars, Zoom MUN) to broaden her horizons without losing sight of her religious grounding.

4.3 Huda: from multilingual youth to spiritual bilingual

Huda's narrative is one of a multilingual upbringing crystallizing into a strong dual identity as a scientifically-inclined, spiritually grounded bilingual. His path shows how early exposure to languages, coupled with a supportive educational ethos, can produce a learner who sees no dichotomy between faith and global competence.

Huda was born into an academic Muslim family, which set the stage for a unique linguistic journey. As a toddler, he moved to Germany with his family when his father pursued a PhD. There, little Huda attended a German kindergarten and quickly picked up German as play language, while Indonesian remained spoken at home (albeit with some German mix). By age 6, upon returning to Indonesia, Huda faced the unusual challenge of having to re-learn Indonesian, since German had almost overtaken it for him. He was effectively a heritage language re-learner in his own country, struggling to recall Indonesian words and avoid inserting German into sentences. With parental effort and immersion among Indonesian peers, he regained fluency in Indonesian in about a year, ending up bilingual (German remained as a passive knowledge). This early experience taught Huda something profound: language is a key to belonging. He felt what it was like to be linguistically "othered" even at home, and how regaining Indonesian let him fully

participate again. It likely instilled humility and an awareness of the power of language to include or exclude, a sensibility that surfaced later when he helped others with English.

Throughout elementary school in Bogor, Huda's parents, recognizing his aptitude and the importance of global languages, put him in extracurricular English classes. Young Huda attended the Insan Kamil English Course (IKEC) twice a week, learning basics with colorful books and songs. But by his own account, he wasn't particularly passionate then; he went because he was told to. His heart was on the futsal field, not on memorizing "This is a cat". Still, he consistently attended and absorbed the basics, even if passively. His father gently reinforced learning at home with spontaneous English phrases, trying to spark interest. For six years, English was background noise in Huda's life, not hated, but not loved, just part of the routine along with prayer, school, and football. Importantly, those years "planted the seeds" of English in his mind, even if they had yet to bloom. His grades were decent, showing that the input took root.

The big decision came after elementary school: while many friends opted for local SMPs, Huda's parents envisioned him continuing the family tradition in *pesantren*, but a modern one with science, hence *Pesantren Sains Tebuireng*. Huda respected his parents' wish and, partly curious about the boarding school experience, enrolled at Trensains for grade 7. Upon entering, Huda encountered a supportive environment that matched his bilingual background. *Pesantren Sains* embraces bilingualism, he found that speaking English was not only allowed but expected on certain days. He told us he felt grateful that unlike stricter *pesantren*, here nobody looked down on him for using English; instead, proficiency in both Arabic and English was "celebrated". This environment was fertile ground for Huda's latent English ability to flourish.

In grade 8, an announcement of an English Speech Contest at provincial level caught Huda's attention. The school needed representatives, and Huda was chosen as one (likely due to his known English ability from classes). In that contest, he did not win first place. In fact, he lost at an early stage, which frustrated him. But the experience "lit a fire within him". Instead of being deterred, Huda turned that setback into motivation to improve. He practiced harder, studied speech techniques, and promised himself he'd do better next time. This reveals a growth mindset and also how a literacy event (a contest) contributed to his identity as a competitor and learner. He also realized he enjoyed the process; as he recounted, "it was nerve-wracking but thrilling to speak on stage in English." It gave him a sense of purpose beyond just acing tests.

By grade 9 (3rd year of junior high), Huda had become a leading figure in English among his peers. Along with a supportive English teacher, he helped establish LITS (Language Improvement Team for Students) for the junior high division. They organized fun activities like weekly English Days, quiz bowls, and mini debates, often borrowing methods from a famous English village in Pare and adding their own twists. Huda was effectively coaching others, friends nicknamed him “Mr. Huda” teasingly to acknowledge his knowledge. He took it in stride, seeing it as a duty to share rather than boast. His dorm quizzes and training sessions not only helped others but reinforced his own mastery. Teaching is known to deepen the teacher’s understanding, and indeed Huda’s command of English grew stronger through this peer mentorship.

Importantly, Huda never felt that being gung-ho about English clashed with being a good Muslim or *santri*. He managed to navigate the two language policy with tact: on Arabic days he dutifully stuck to Arabic to show respect for collective rules, even if English might’ve been more comfortable in some instances. “It’s not about comfort, it’s about honoring collective practice,” he would say. This demonstrates his understanding of contextual appropriateness and solidarity. He saw the value in both languages serving different functions. As he matured, he articulated that *Pesantren* Sains provided a figured world where his “triple identity, *santri*, science student, and English learner, was not only possible but celebrated”. This is a powerful encapsulation: Huda felt whole in this environment, able to be a devout *santri*, a nerdy science kid, and an English enthusiast all at once. In theoretical terms, the figured world of the *pesantren* had been expanded to include roles like “the English-speaking *santri*,” making it easier for him to integrate those facets of himself.

Of course, not all peers shared Huda’s zeal for English. He encountered some who dismissed the need for foreign languages (“success doesn’t require English”). Huda would sometimes debate them, echoing his father’s adage: “Without English, we lose many opportunities.” Some were swayed by his reasoning and joined his practice sessions; others remained indifferent. Huda didn’t mind, he recognized that everyone has different interests. This shows his leadership maturity; he wasn’t pushy or judgmental, yet he made himself available to anyone willing to learn. His stance also reveals an internalization of the value of English as part of his worldview: to him, encouraging others was almost a mission, tied to his identity as a helper and change agent.

By senior high (MA) at *Pesantren Sains*, Huda had solidified his reputation. He continued to excel academically (particularly in science and math) while maintaining his language edge. Teachers often tapped him for inter-school competitions, from speech contests to quiz bees. He even scored 490 on a TOEFL ITP simulation in 11th grade without formal prep, a solid above-average score for his age and context. His teacher encouraged him that with practice he could surpass 500, motivating Huda to self-study using TOEFL/IELTS prep materials. To Huda, a high TOEFL score became “a passport to scholarships, exchange programs, and global opportunities” he saw concrete gateways opening if he continued to polish his English.

At the same time, Huda was deeply involved in religious life at the *pesantren*: attending all prayers, leading occasionally as imam for younger students, participating in diniyah (Islamic studies) classes in the evenings. He learned to recite Quran with proper tajweed, studied classical texts (in Arabic), and engaged in discussions on Islamic economics with kyai (given his father's background). This dual commitment is what he described as being a “modern *santri*”: able to pray in Arabic, code-switch in English, and solve equations in science, all while staying grounded in faith and humility. We actually see him referencing Street (1984) concept without knowing it: he lived the idea that literacy practices (English, Arabic, scientific discourse) are all shaped by and expressive of values. For Huda, using English was an expression of self and also an enactment of the *pesantren*'s vision. He often cited an ideal: that one day, Muslim Indonesians should be leading scientists and scholars on the world stage, and language shouldn't be a barrier to dawah or collaboration.

As Huda approached graduation, he juggled intense exam prep for national university entrance (UTBK) with maintaining his English regime. Even though English wasn't directly tested, he didn't drop it, signaling his long-term orientation beyond immediate exams. He had a clear vision for his future: to become an international professional, perhaps a consultant in global financial strategy (not coincidentally diverging a bit from his father's academic path in Islamic finance, making his own mark). He vividly imagined boardrooms with multinational colleagues and him mediating with eloquent English. This imagined identity of a cosmopolitan yet principled Muslim man fueled his determination. He knew English was “indispensable” to that vision.

In a reflective essay Huda wrote (which he shared with us), he noted that among the greatest lessons from *Pesantren Sains* was confidence and global perspective afforded

by English proficiency. He recounted milestone memories like the initial contest loss that spurred him and the legacy of the LITS club that continued even after he moved on to senior high, proving that what he built was sustainable. Huda took pride in leaving a legacy, a hallmark of someone who sees themselves as a change agent in their community. The essay concluded with him committing to keep English as a “permanent part of his life” no matter where he goes. He even mused about telling his younger self to persist with those childhood English classes because one day he’d be thankful. It’s a poignant full-circle acknowledgment of growth.

From an identity perspective, Huda exemplifies what might be called “spiritual bilingualism.” He achieved high functional bilingualism in English while staying deeply rooted in his spiritual/religious identity. In fact, each seems to reinforce the other: his religious ethos gave him discipline and moral purpose that aided his studies, and his mastery of English expanded his horizons which he then integrated back into his vision of contributing to the ummah (global Muslim community). He doesn’t see English as Western per se, he sees it as a tool that a Muslim can wield as well as anyone, for good purposes. Thus, he avoided any internal conflict about loyalty or authenticity; being fluent in English did not make him feel any less authentically Muslim or Indonesian. This is likely due to both personal background (family emphasis on education and openness) and the *pesantren*’s forward-looking culture that legitimized English.

Huda’s literacy practices ranged from formal ones like studying textbooks and giving speeches, to informal ones like joking in mixed English-Indonesian with friends, or reading Wikipedia articles on science in English for fun. Each practice was a building block in constructing his identity as a knowledgeable, helpful, and globally-minded *santri*. Because he engaged so fully, literacy for him became, as we saw, “an expression of self, a negotiation of place, and a tool for transforming others’ worldviews” quoting our analytical notes there. In essence, Huda’s journey shows the power of a supportive environment and personal agency in fostering a hybrid identity that is not conflicted but synergistic.

In summary, Huda grew from a child with scattered linguistic experiences into a young man who epitomizes the integration of local and global literacies. His identity is that of a modern *santri*, one who can stand with one foot in the traditional world of *pesantren* and the other in the global community, and use the languages of both to bridge understanding. He represents the potential outcome of *Pesantren* Education 5.0:

graduates who are bilingual, scientifically literate, culturally rooted, and confident to navigate the wider world.

5 CONCLUSION

This research set out to explore how English learners in a modern Indonesian *pesantren* (*Pesantren* Education 5.0 setting) practice literacy and negotiate their identities, particularly hybrid identities that straddle religious and global domains. Through in-depth narratives of three students, we have seen how global English and local Islamic educational values can intersect to produce unique, hybrid forms of identity.

Several key findings emerge from the study:

- **Hybrid Identity Formation:** All three participants successfully blended aspects of *pesantren* identity (devotion, discipline, community orientation) with global identity facets (English proficiency, digital literacy, international outlook). They became bilingual, bicultural individuals who did not see their global engagement as detracting from their religious values, rather, they often framed it as enhancing their role in society or faith community. This challenges any simplistic notion of a clash between global English and local faith; in these cases, the two were negotiated into harmony.
- **Role of Literacy Practices:** The participants' literacy practices in English (ranging from consuming media and writing speeches to teaching others and joining global forums) were central to their identity development. Literacy was not merely a skill, it was the medium through which they explored new roles (like leader, activist, or competitor) and expressed evolving self-concepts. Direct quotes from their experiences illustrate how reading or speaking English often had personal significance ("it made me feel unique," "it opened my perspective," "it allowed me to contribute") beyond linguistic content.
- **Learner Agency and Resilience:** Despite facing constraints, whether strict school rules, negative prior experiences, or cultural expectations, these learners exhibited strong agency. They found creative ways to pursue English learning (such as Nisha leveraging school competitions to compensate for lost internet access, or Naura turning pandemic isolation into a global learning opportunity). They also made deliberate choices to align their new skills with their values (for instance,

choosing Muslim-friendly environments for study). Their stories highlight that with motivation and support, students can overcome significant barriers and reshape their own trajectories.

- **Institutional Support and Environment:** The relatively progressive environment of *Pesantren Sains Tebuireng* (which values science and languages alongside religious studies) was a crucial enabler for these outcomes. Institutional attitudes that embraced bilingualism and innovation gave students permission to explore global literacies without feeling they were betraying their roots. Mentorship from teachers and a peer culture that admired success (Huda's peers calling him "Mr. Dictionary" admiringly) provided additional fuel. This suggests that similar educational settings seeking to produce globally competent yet grounded graduates should foster a school culture that explicitly legitimizes hybrid aspirations.
- **Identity as Evolving and Contextual:** The research confirms that identity is not static, each participant's sense of self underwent significant evolution during their adolescent years. Moreover, these identities were context-dependent and multi-layered. In different contexts, they might emphasize different facets (e.g., Huda was a devout *santri* in prayer hall, a gregarious English coach in language club, and a science geek in class, all authentic parts of him). The concept of figured worlds was useful in understanding this; the *pesantren* provided a figured world where multiple identities could co-exist, and the learners navigated these worlds adeptly, sometimes even altering the figured world by introducing new norms (like making speaking English "cool" in a dorm full of *santri*).

In concluding, we reflect on the significance of these findings. For the field of language education and applied linguistics, this study contributes a detailed case of how global language learning occurs within a non-Western, religious schooling system. It demonstrates that English can be appropriated in service of local identities, an empowering message that counters narratives of linguistic imperialism or cultural loss. It also provides an exemplar of Education 5.0 ideals in practice: students using cutting-edge knowledge (English as global lingua franca) hand-in-hand with socio-emotional growth (confidence, leadership) and grounded in strong values.

For practitioners, the experiences of Nisha, Naura, and Huda suggest that educators should view students as whole persons with existing identity commitments, and

then connect the new language to those commitments. When students see that learning English can help them be better versions of who they want to be, whether that is a community role model, a voice for justice, or a bridge between worlds, their engagement becomes profound. Conversely, if English is taught in isolation from their identity or seen as antithetical to it, learning will be surface-level or resisted. Therefore, bridging activities, culturally responsive pedagogies, and dialogues about the purpose of English learning can be very impactful in similar contexts.

While rich in depth, this study has limitations. It focused on three high-achieving students within one unique *pesantren*; they are not necessarily representative of all *pesantren* students or even their peers. Less motivated or lower-proficiency students might experience these dynamics differently (perhaps struggling more with English or choosing not to invest). Also, the research was retrospective in nature for parts of their childhood experiences, relying on memory and self-report which can be subjective. There may have been a positive bias in what they chose to share (for instance, they might downplay any continuing struggles or identity conflicts out of a desire to present themselves well). Moreover, *Pesantren Sains Tebuireng's* model is somewhat elite, not all *pesantren* have science programs or an openness to English; thus generalizing to more traditional *pesantren* should be done with caution.

This research opens avenues for further exploration. Comparative studies could be conducted in more conservative *pesantren* or in other religious school contexts (e.g., madrasahs, Catholic seminaries, etc.) to see how language-literacy-identity dynamics play out there. It would be intriguing to investigate students who do experience conflict between English and religious identities, what factors lead to conflict versus synergy? Additionally, longitudinal studies that follow *pesantren* students into university or the workplace would shed light on how durable these hybrid identities are: Do Nisha, Naura, and Huda maintain their bilingual, bicultural selves in the next phase of life? Do they become change agents bridging communities as they envisioned?

Another area for research is the role of specific literacy artifacts (like Nisha's doll or Naura's film script). Our study noted these in passing; a more focused analysis on how material artifacts or multimodal literacies (visual, digital texts) contribute to identity in such settings could enrich the understanding. Finally, given the evolving educational landscape in Indonesia and similar countries, investigating the implementation of Education 5.0 concepts in various schools, and their impact on student identity and

learning outcomes, would be valuable for policymakers and educators aiming to modernize education without eroding cultural heritage.

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Authors' Contribution

Both authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

Data availability

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

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