

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING IN ISLAMIC SCHOOLS OF TERENGGANU AND EAST JAVA: BRIDGING EFL AND ESL PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract: This study explores students' perceptions of English language learning in Islamic schools in Terengganu, Malaysia, and East Java, Indonesia, focusing on how English is situated within EFL (English as a Foreign Language) and ESL (English as a Second Language) frameworks. Both regions represent Muslim-majority communities with strong religious schooling traditions, yet they differ in their national language policies, Malaysia's leaning toward ESL due to English's formal role in education, and Indonesia's maintenance of an EFL orientation. This research aims to investigate how these differing contexts shape students' attitudes, motivation, and classroom experiences in English learning. The research involved 86 secondary students across 2 Islamic schools, one in Terengganu and one in East Java, who completed a structured perception-based questionnaire. The questionnaire assessed learners' enjoyment of English, their motivation, preferences in instructional delivery, and perceptions of school support and teaching methods. The data were analyzed quantitatively using descriptive statistics and cross-regional comparison. Findings indicate that students in both regions generally exhibit a positive attitude toward learning English, particularly recognizing its global significance. However, Terengganu students reported higher engagement with interactive and multimedia-based learning, aligning with ESL environments that offer greater exposure. East Java students expressed stronger reliance on teacher explanation and reported limited facility support. These findings highlight the necessity of bridging ESL and EFL pedagogical strategies to foster more responsive English instruction in Islamic schools. The study underscores the importance of context-sensitive curriculum development that integrates communicative competence with religious-cultural values, contributing to more inclusive and effective English language education.

Keywords: English Language Learning, Islamic Schools, EFL, ESL, Student Perception

1. INTRODUCTION

English language education occupies a complex and often contested position in Muslim-majority contexts, where cultural, religious, and national policy factors intersect to shape classroom practices and learner experiences. Within Southeast Asia, Malaysia and Indonesia present particularly compelling cases for comparison. While both nations share deep Islamic heritage, strong religious schooling traditions, and a commitment to integrating modern education into Islamic institutions, they differ in their national language policies and orientations toward English. In Malaysia, English is accorded an English as a Second Language (ESL) status, functioning as an important medium of instruction in specific subjects and playing a visible role in official communication. In contrast, Indonesia maintains an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) orientation, in which English is taught as a subject but rarely used in daily life or formal domains outside the classroom. These distinctions influence not only language policy at the national level but also how English is perceived, taught, and learned in Islamic schools.

Islamic schools in both Terengganu, Malaysia, and East Java, Indonesia, operate within frameworks that aim to balance religious instruction with academic excellence. The dual mission of these institutions to nurture Islamic identity while preparing students for participation in a globalized world positions English as a critical, yet sometimes contested, component of the curriculum. For many students, learning English is associated with access to higher education, international communication, and broader career opportunities. However, the degree to which students engage with English and the pedagogical strategies used to teach it are strongly shaped by the surrounding linguistic and educational environment.

Research in language education consistently shows that sociolinguistic context plays a decisive role in shaping learners' attitudes, motivation, and engagement (Alhamami, 2025). In ESL environments, such as Malaysia, learners are more likely to encounter English in daily interactions, through media, and in formal education settings. This exposure can encourage more positive attitudes toward the language, as students perceive its functional utility and cultural relevance. Furthermore, ESL classrooms often integrate interactive, communicative approaches supported by multimedia resources, collaborative activities, and authentic language input (Jager et al., 2025). By contrast, in EFL contexts like Indonesia, opportunities for real-life use of English are limited, and exposure is largely confined to the classroom. Instruction tends to rely more heavily on teacher explanation, grammar-focused lessons, and structured practice, with less emphasis on authentic communicative experiences.

The implications for English learning in Islamic schools are significant. On one hand, teachers must navigate cultural sensitivities and ensure that English instruction aligns with Islamic values and school ethos. On the other, they must respond to students' needs for communicative competence in an increasingly interconnected world. This balance requires context-sensitive pedagogy that draws from both ESL and EFL traditions, adapting methods to the realities of each setting (Boo, 2025).

This study responds to these challenges by investigating students' perceptions of English learning in two Islamic secondary schools one in Terengganu and one in East Java. Specifically, it examines four key areas: (1) learners' enjoyment of English, (2) their motivation for learning, (3) preferences in instructional delivery, and (4) perceptions of school support and teaching methods. A total of 86 secondary students participated in the research by completing a structured perception-based questionnaire. The instrument gathered quantitative data, which was analysed using descriptive statistics and cross-regional comparisons to identify patterns and divergences between the two contexts.

Preliminary findings reveal both convergence and divergence in students' experiences. Across both regions, students generally exhibit positive attitudes toward English, particularly recognizing its role as a global lingua franca. However, Terengganu students report higher engagement with interactive and multimedia-based learning, a finding consistent with ESL contexts that provide greater exposure and technological integration. In contrast, East Java students express stronger reliance on teacher explanations and traditional classroom formats, alongside reporting limited access to facilities that support interactive learning.

The significance of these findings lies in their implications for curriculum design and pedagogical adaptation. Bridging ESL and EFL approaches could help Islamic schools in both contexts create more engaging, culturally relevant, and effective English programs. This might involve, for example, incorporating multimedia and

interactive elements into EFL classrooms, while ensuring that ESL settings maintain strong links between language learning and students' cultural and religious identities.

Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how English language education functions within Islamic schooling systems in Southeast Asia. By situating the discussion within the broader ESL–EFL framework and acknowledging the socio-religious context, the study highlights the need for curriculum development that is both globally oriented and locally grounded. Such an approach not only enhances communicative competence but also reinforces the integration of language learning with religious-cultural values, ensuring that English education in Islamic schools is inclusive, responsive, and empowering for all learners

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 English Language Learning in Muslim Majority Contexts

In Muslim-majority countries, English language education often exists within a complex sociocultural and political framework. While English is widely recognized as a global lingua franca (Robinson-Jones et al., 2024), its integration into education systems can be influenced by religious, historical, and policy factors. In many Islamic schools, English is positioned alongside Arabic and the national language, creating a multilingual environment with distinct functional roles for each language (Fachriza et al., 2022). This tri-lingual model reflects an effort to balance global connectivity with the preservation of religious identity and cultural heritage.

Studies have shown that the acceptance and motivation to learn English in such contexts are shaped by perceptions of its compatibility with Islamic values (Fachriza et al., 2023). In some cases, English is seen as a neutral tool for accessing scientific knowledge and engaging in international communication; in others, it is approached cautiously due to concerns over cultural influence. This dual perception underscores the need for culturally sensitive curriculum design that affirms learners' identities while promoting communicative competence.

2.2 ESL and EFL Orientations in Southeast Asia

The distinction between English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is central to understanding language learning environments. ESL contexts typically involve a higher degree of exposure to English outside the classroom, with the language used in official communication, higher education, and media. This environment supports naturalistic acquisition alongside formal instruction. Malaysia, for instance, positions English as a second language with a recognized role in national examinations and certain domains of instruction (Saputra et al., 2023).

Conversely, EFL contexts, such as Indonesia, limit English use to academic settings, meaning that learners rarely encounter authentic English outside of lessons. In such settings, classroom instruction becomes the primary often only source of input, necessitating more explicit grammar teaching, structured practice, and teacher-led explanation (Mohamed Mokhtar et al., 2022). The limited exposure can impact learners' fluency, confidence, and pragmatic competence, placing greater demands on pedagogical innovation.

2.3 Student Perceptions and Motivation in Language Learning

Student perceptions of English learning particularly their attitudes, motivation, and preferences are critical factors influencing achievement (Fan & Zhang, 2024). Motivation in language learning is commonly divided into *integrative and instrumental* orientations. Integrative motivation refers to learners' desire to integrate with the culture of the target language, while instrumental motivation relates to pragmatic goals such as academic success or career advancement (Ellis et al., 2020).

In ESL contexts, learners often display a blend of both motivations, as opportunities for interaction with English speakers and exposure to English media make cultural integration more feasible. In EFL contexts, instrumental motivation may dominate, as English serves primarily as a tool for academic and professional purposes rather than everyday communication. The degree of institutional support, availability of learning facilities, and teaching methodology can further shape how students perceive the relevance and enjoyability of English learning.

2.4 English Education in Islamic Schools: Pedagogical Challenges and Strategies

Islamic schools operate with unique pedagogical considerations. Teachers are tasked not only with delivering language instruction but also with ensuring that materials and classroom practices align with Islamic ethical frameworks (Sista & Budiman, 2020). This may influence the selection of teaching materials, the incorporation of religious themes into language lessons, and the degree of openness to Western cultural references.

Pedagogical strategies in Islamic schools vary depending on whether they are situated in ESL or EFL environments. ESL-oriented Islamic schools may adopt more communicative and task-based approaches, taking advantage of the availability of authentic materials and multimedia tools. (Nunan, 2009) EFL-oriented schools may need to place greater emphasis on scaffolding, explicit grammar instruction, and the use of localized content that resonates with students' cultural and religious backgrounds. In both cases, integrating digital resources, interactive methods, and project-based learning has been found to increase engagement while respecting the schools' religious ethos (Setiawan & Romadlon, 2024)

2.5 Bridging ESL and EFL Approaches for Islamic School Contexts

Given the differences between ESL and EFL environments, there is growing interest in developing hybrid pedagogical approaches that can be adapted across contexts. Such approaches draw on the strengths of communicative, exposure-rich ESL strategies while also incorporating the structured, teacher-led guidance often necessary in EFL settings. In the case of Islamic schools, this hybridization must also address the integration of language learning with religious-cultural values, ensuring that learners develop global communicative competence without compromising their identity.

Recent studies suggest that curriculum development in Islamic schools should not be a simple transfer of ESL methods into EFL contexts or vice versa (Odilovna Djaborova, 2020). Instead, it should involve a nuanced adaptation that considers exposure levels, resource availability, teacher expertise, and cultural-religious factors. This aligns with the central aim of the present study: to investigate how

learners in Islamic schools in Terengganu and East Java perceive their English learning experiences and how these perceptions reflect the broader ESL–EFL divide

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a survey research design to investigate how differing English Medium Instruction (EMI) contexts influence students’ attitudes, motivation, and classroom experiences in English learning. The participants consisted of a total of 86 students drawn from two Islamic secondary schools in Terengganu, Malaysia, and East Java, Indonesia. The school in Terengganu represents an ESL (English as a Second Language) context, where English maintains an official role in education and is supported by greater exposure beyond the classroom, whereas the school in East Java reflects an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) environment, where English exposure is largely limited to classroom instruction. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to include only those with prior EMI learning experiences, thereby ensuring comparability between the two groups. Data were gathered using a structured questionnaire consisting of 10-point Likert-scale items adapted from established motivational scales and contextualized for the EMI setting, addressing dimensions such as integrative and instrumental motivation, attitudes toward English, and perceptions of EMI classroom practices. The questionnaire was administered in both printed and digital formats, with distribution facilitated by school authorities to enable in-class completion under standardized conditions. Responses were collected anonymously to encourage candid feedback. The data were subjected to quantitative analysis employing descriptive statistical techniques to summarize and interpret the central tendencies and variability of the responses, along with cross-regional comparative analysis to identify and examine statistically significant differences between the ESL and EFL cohorts, thereby providing insights into how contextual factors shape students’ motivation and learning experiences in EMI environments.

4. RESULTS

Table 1: The comparison of ESL vs EFL English Language Learning in Islamic Schools of Terengganu and East Java

Aspects	(ESL – Malaysia, <i>n</i> ≈ 43)	(EFL – Indonesia, <i>n</i> ≈ 43)
Attitudes toward English	90% – very positive and open; English perceived as compatible with Islamic values and essential for global engagement	60% – positive but more cautious; English valued mainly as an academic skill rather than a part of daily life or identity
Motivation	85% – predominantly integrative; desire to use English for cross-cultural communication, higher education, and religious outreach	65% – predominantly instrumental; focus on exams, academic performance, and future job opportunities
Classroom Interaction	80% – high, communicative and student-centred; frequent pair/group work, discussions, and project-based learning	50% – moderate, teacher-centred; emphasis on grammar, vocabulary drills, and reading comprehension

Language Use Beyond Classroom	85% – very frequent; English used in extracurricular clubs, competitions, and some non-English subjects	35% – low frequency; limited to homework and classroom tasks
Perceived Relevance	90% – high relevance for both academic and life skills (social, economic, and religious purposes)	55% – mainly an academic requirement for graduation and job qualification
Learning Resources	88% – wide access to authentic materials, multimedia, and trained ESL teachers	45% – limited access to authentic materials; heavy reliance on textbooks

In the Malaysian ESL context ($n \approx 43$), students show overwhelmingly positive attitudes toward English, with 90% perceiving it as compatible with Islamic values and crucial for global engagement. Their motivation is largely integrative (85%), driven by aspirations for cross-cultural communication, higher education, and religious outreach. Classroom interaction is highly communicative and student-centred, with 80% engaging actively in pair/group work, discussions, and project-based activities. Beyond the classroom, English is frequently used (85%) in extracurricular clubs, competitions, and certain non-English subjects. Students see English as highly relevant (90%) for academic, social, economic, and religious purposes, and they enjoy wide access (88%) to authentic materials, multimedia, and well-trained ESL teachers.

In contrast, the Indonesian EFL context ($n \approx 43$) reflects a more cautious but still positive stance, with 60% viewing English mainly as an academic skill rather than a part of daily life or identity. Motivation is primarily instrumental (65%), focusing on exams, academic performance, and job prospects. Classroom interaction is moderate (50%), typically teacher-centred and focused on grammar, vocabulary drills, and reading comprehension. Use of English beyond the classroom is relatively low (35%), limited to homework and school tasks. Its perceived relevance is modest (55%), mainly as an academic requirement for graduation and employment. Access to resources is also limited (45%), with a heavy reliance on textbooks and fewer opportunities to engage with authentic materials.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that while both the Malaysian and Indonesian cohorts—specifically students from Islamic secondary level Terengganu Malaysia, and Islamic secondary level East Java share a comparable religious and cultural orientation rooted in Islam, their perceptions of English language learning diverge due to structural, curricular, and policy differences in their respective educational systems. In Malaysia, where English retains an official role within the national education policy, the language is more deeply embedded across curricular and extracurricular domains, leading to greater exposure and functional use. This policy environment fosters a perception of English not only as an academic subject but also as a tool for broader socio-economic mobility and global participation. Consequently, students of ESL Malaysia often exhibit higher levels of integrative motivation (Nguyen & Habók, 2021), perceiving English as a bridge between religious identity and global engagement.

Conversely, in Indonesia, where English is designated as a foreign language (EFL) within the national curriculum, exposure remains largely confined to classroom

instruction. The absence of English as a medium of instruction in other subjects, combined with limited opportunities for authentic language use beyond the school context, contributes to more constrained perceptions of its relevance. Although students from Islamic secondary school in East Java Indonesia recognize English as a valuable academic and professional skill, its role is frequently framed in instrumental rather than integrative terms (Ni & Xu, 2025; Robinson-Jones et al., 2024). This instrumental orientation, shaped by the national EFL policy and the exam-oriented curriculum, tends to limit opportunities for developing communicative competence beyond the prescribed syllabus.

These differences in language exposure and orientation have implications for student engagement, which encompasses the time, effort, interest, and cognitive investment learners dedicate to achieving their learning goals (Zou et al., 2025). In Malaysian ESL-oriented contexts, the broader functional use of English in school activities provides more opportunities for emotional engagement particularly through the positive emotion of enjoyment which has been linked to higher co-regulation and socially shared regulation in collaborative learning (Zhang & Gao, 2024). In contrast, the more compartmentalized role of English in Indonesian EFL settings may limit the affective benefits of authentic interaction, making it essential to design learning experiences that deliberately cultivate enjoyment (Dewaele & Meftah, 2024; Fan & Zhang, 2024).

A positive learning environment characterized by teacher emotional support, clear communication, and opportunities for meaningful interaction—has been shown to enhance both academic emotions and engagement (Liu & Zhou, 2024). In Malaysian Islamic schools, where English use is more socially embedded, learners may more readily experience such positive academic emotions, including hope, relaxation, and novelty, which foster intrinsic motivation and willingness to participate (Aubrey, 2025; Masuwai et al., 2025). In Indonesia, by contrast, the more exam-oriented EFL context may necessitate deliberate pedagogical strategies to promote similar affective benefits, such as project-based activities, CLIL, and student-led tasks incorporating culturally and religiously relevant themes (Fachriza A, 2024).

Motivation is central to sustaining engagement and learning success (Nguyen & Habók, 2021) (Ni & Xu, 2025). Students with intrinsic motivation are more likely to immerse themselves in challenging, meaningful tasks (Shang & Ma, 2024), while integrative motivation fosters openness to intercultural communication and long-term language investment (Robinson-Jones et al., 2024). In the Malaysian ESL setting, policy and practice naturally support integrative motivation, whereas in the Indonesian EFL context, motivation may lean more heavily toward instrumental goals, requiring teachers to intentionally embed opportunities for intercultural and identity-related engagement within instruction.

Individual learner traits, such as grit, can also mediate the relationship between environment and affective outcomes. Learners with higher grit tend to view language learning tasks as controllable and aligned with meaningful goals, leading to greater enjoyment and Willingness to Communicate (Huang et al., 2025). In Malaysian contexts, where authentic communication is more frequent, gritty learners can leverage these opportunities to deepen competence. In Indonesian contexts, structured exposure through extracurricular activities or digital collaborative projects can help foster similar affective and behavioural engagement.

Instructional preferences also play a role. Research shows that English Medium Instruction (EMI) can enhance global engagement and intercultural competence

when implemented in a supportive, growth-oriented manner (Dzormeku et al., 2024) Differentiated instruction (Jager et al., 2025) and attention to students' Basic Psychological Needs (Teraoka et al., 2025) can further sustain motivation. In Malaysian schools, institutional structures may facilitate these approaches through teacher training and resource allocation, while in Indonesian settings, teacher preparedness and institutional support may require strengthening to achieve similar outcomes.

The role of school support is particularly significant in Islamic education contexts, where teachers are seen as moral exemplars blending *'Ilm Aqli* (rational knowledge) and *'Ilm Naqli* (revealed knowledge) in a holistic educational approach (Masuwai et al., 2025). In Malaysia, this integration aligns more seamlessly with a multilingual policy environment, whereas in Indonesia, English may be more compartmentalized from religious and cultural domains. Bridging this gap could involve integrating English into religious and socio-cultural activities such as debates, khutbah simulations, or Islamic-themed digital storytelling projects thus enhancing both instrumental and integrative motivation.

From a pedagogical standpoint, bridging EFL and ESL approaches in contexts like Indonesia does not imply replicating Malaysia's policy structure, but rather adapting ESL-informed strategies including CLIL, content-based instruction, and increased English use in extracurricular activities to create semi-immersive environments within national curriculum constraints. This approach, combined with emotionally supportive teaching and engagement-focused strategies, can foster the enjoyment, motivation, and engagement necessary for sustained language learning.

Ultimately, these findings underscore the interplay between macro-level policy and micro-level classroom realities, highlighting that language status whether ESL or EFL shapes not only pedagogical approaches but also learner identity, motivation, and engagement. A deliberate and context-sensitive integration of EFL and ESL pedagogies, informed by research on engagement, enjoyment, and motivation, may offer a sustainable path for enhancing English language learning outcomes in settings similar to secondary Islamic school in Terengganu Malaysia and East Java Indonesia. These explanations will be presented in table below:

Aspects	Description
Language Policy & ESL/EFL Status	Malaysia: ESL, greater exposure inside and outside the classroom, fostering integrative motivation. Indonesia: EFL, limited classroom exposure, motivation tends to be instrumental.
Student Engagement	Engagement includes cognitive, emotional, and behavioral participation. Malaysia's ESL environment supports higher engagement through authentic interaction. Indonesia's EFL context requires specific strategies to create engagement
Enjoyment & Positive Emotions	Enjoyment is linked to optimal challenge, novelty, and achievement. A positive environment enhances academic emotions and motivation.
Motivation (Integrative & Instrumental)	Malaysia shows stronger integrative motivation due to socio-cultural exposure. Indonesia tends toward instrumental motivation due to exam-oriented goals.
Grit & Willingness to Communicate	Students with high grit tend to enjoy learning more and are more willing to communicate. The ESL environment offers more opportunities for communication.

Instructional Preferences	EMI & CLIL promote global competence when supported by a positive learning climate. Differentiated instruction is needed to match students' characteristics.
Perceived School Support & Teacher's Role	Teachers as moral exemplars integrate <i>'Ilm Aqli</i> and <i>'Ilm Naqli</i> . Integrating English into religious-social activities strengthens both integrative and instrumental motivation.

6. CONCLUSION

English language education in Islamic schools in Terengganu, Malaysia (ESL) and East Java, Indonesia (EFL) reflects shared religious-cultural foundations but distinct policy, exposure, and pedagogical contexts. Malaysia's ESL status provides broader English use inside and outside the classroom, fostering integrative motivation, higher engagement, and greater enjoyment through authentic interaction, multimedia, and communicative approaches. Indonesia's EFL context limits exposure to classroom settings, leading to instrumental motivation, teacher-centred instruction, and reliance on textbooks, with fewer opportunities for real-life language use.

Student engagement in Malaysia is enhanced by policy-supported immersion, while Indonesia requires deliberate strategies such as CLIL, project-based learning, and integrating English into religious-social activities to stimulate similar affective and behavioral participation. Enjoyment and positive emotions, linked to optimal challenge and novelty, play a key role in sustaining motivation in both contexts.

Grit and willingness to communicate are better leveraged in ESL settings with frequent authentic interaction, whereas EFL contexts can develop these traits through structured, semi-immersive activities. Instructional preferences highlight the need for differentiated instruction and strong school support, with teachers acting as moral exemplars who integrate religious and academic learning. A hybrid ESL-EFL approach, sensitive to local culture and resources, offers a sustainable model for enhancing English outcomes in Islamic schools.

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