TOWARDS CULTURALLY SUSTAINING ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING: LOCAL WISDOM AND MULTILINGUALISM AMONG *SANTRI* IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

The growing emphasis on culturally responsive education has highlighted the need for English language teaching (ELT) approaches that preserve learners' cultural identities while preparing them for global communication. This study explores the implementation of culturally sustaining English language teaching through the integration of local wisdom and multilingualism among *santri* in an Islamic Higher Education institution in Indonesia. Employing a qualitative case study design, data were collected through classroom observations, and document study with *santri* participating in the *Ma'had al Jamiah* English program. The findings reveal three major dimensions of culturally sustaining ELT. First, learning materials were systematically aligned with semester learning outcomes and incorporated local wisdom themes, including Islamic religious celebrations, New Year traditions, traditional dances, and regional foods, alongside grammar, vocabulary, and integrated language skills. Second, instruction was implemented through teacher explanation, student presentations, and guided practice, creating opportunities for learners to communicate culturally meaningful content in English while utilizing their multilingual resources. Third, assessment addressed the four language skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) through authentic tasks that required students to represent local culture in English. These practices demonstrate that English learning can simultaneously develop communicative competence and sustain learners' cultural identities. The study further argues that the *Ma'had al Jamiah* provides a distinctive multilingual environment where Indonesian, regional languages, and English coexist as complementary linguistic resources that support culturally sustaining pedagogy. This research contributes to the growing scholarship on culturally sustaining English language teaching by extending its application to Islamic Higher Education and proposing a pedagogical framework in which local wisdom serves as instructional content, multilingualism functions as a pedagogical resource, and English becomes a medium for intercultural communication. The findings offer practical implications for curriculum development and English language instruction in culturally diverse higher education contexts.

Keywords: culturally sustaining pedagogy; English language teaching; local wisdom; multilingualism; Islamic Higher Education; *santri*.

INTRODUCTION

At many Islamic Higher Education institutions in Indonesia, academic learning is complemented by residential education through a *Ma'had* (Islamic dormitory) program. These programs function not only as boarding facilities but also as centers for character formation, religious learning, and language development. Students admitted to this program come from diverse geographical, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds through a competitive admission process. Consequently, they bring rich multilingual repertoires, including Indonesian, regional languages, Arabic, and varying levels of English proficiency. To strengthen students' academic and personal development, *Ma'had*

organizes structured learning activities outside regular lecture hours, particularly during evening sessions. Among the compulsory enrichment programs offered is English language instruction, which aims to improve students' communicative competence while preparing them for academic and global engagement (Magfirah et al., 2023)

The multilingual and multicultural composition of *Ma'had* provides a unique context for English language teaching (ELT). Rather than viewing students' linguistic diversity as an obstacle, recent studies suggest that multilingual resources should be recognized as valuable assets that facilitate language learning through translanguaging and culturally responsive pedagogies. Research conducted in Indonesian higher education demonstrates that students who are encouraged to strategically utilize their multiple languages exhibit greater participation, deeper comprehension, and stronger communicative confidence in English learning. Likewise, systematic reviews on pedagogical translanguaging emphasize that multilingual classroom practices enable learners to negotiate meaning more effectively while maintaining their linguistic identities (Zakharova, Yelena and Lasagabaster, 2026). Such findings indicate that the multilingual environment of *Ma'had* can become a powerful foundation for designing English instruction that acknowledges and utilizes students' diverse linguistic resources.

Beyond multilingualism, integrating local wisdom into ELT has gained increasing attention as a means of making English learning more culturally meaningful. Rather than relying solely on Western-oriented teaching materials, English instruction can incorporate local cultural values, traditions, and community knowledge that resonate with learners' lived experiences. Studies in Indonesian higher education have shown that embedding local wisdom into English courses enhances students' learning motivation, cultural awareness, and intercultural communicative competence (Jaya et al., 2024). Similar findings have been reported by (Silva, et al, 2025), who argue that ethnopedagogical approaches enable students to develop English proficiency while preserving indigenous cultural values. Furthermore, (Jaya, 2024) demonstrate that contextualizing English instruction through local cultural perspectives encourages greater engagement among university students and strengthens the relevance of classroom learning.

For students living in *Ma'had*, local wisdom extends beyond regional traditions to encompass the values and educational culture of pesantren, such as mutual respect

(*ta'dhim*), cooperation (*ta'awun*), sincerity (*ikhlas*), discipline, and communal responsibility. These values shape students' daily interactions and provide authentic contexts for English communication. However, despite the growing body of literature on local wisdom in ELT, relatively few studies have examined how Islamic educational values and multilingual practices can be integrated simultaneously within English instruction in Islamic Higher Education (Magfirah et al., 2023). This gap suggests the need to reconceptualize ELT in *Ma'had* by drawing upon both students' multilingual repertoires and the cultural resources embedded in the *pesantren* tradition.

Such an approach aligns with the principles of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP), which advocates educational practices that sustain learners' cultural identities while promoting academic achievement. In English language education, CSP encourages teachers to value students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds as integral components of classroom learning rather than treating them as barriers. Recent reviews on intercultural competence and culturally responsive teaching further emphasize that English instruction should foster learners' ability to communicate across cultures while maintaining their own cultural identities (Setiawan, S., Rahmadani, N.P., 2026; Zhou et al., 2024) Therefore, the *Ma'had* environment offers a promising setting for developing culturally sustaining English language teaching that integrates local wisdom, multilingualism, and Islamic educational values to prepare santri for participation in both national and global communities.

METHODS

The research applied case study design. The subjects are 19 *santri* of *Ma'had Al Jamiah* UIN Raden Mas Said Surakarta. All of them are females from places of Java, Bali, and Aceh. Observation of the class activities and document study are used as techniques of collecting data and methodological triangulation is implemented. Miles, Huberman, and Saldana's interactive analysis model was used for the analysis data technique.

Findings

Selection of Learning Materials

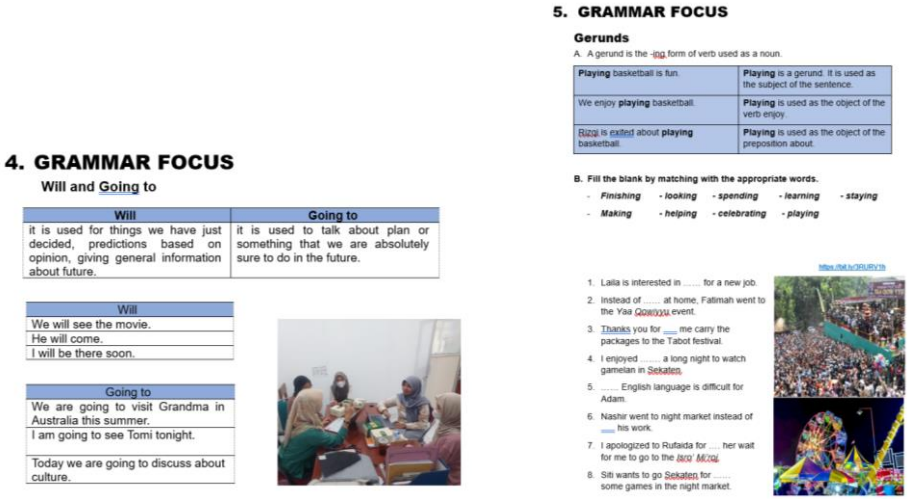
The findings indicate that the selection of learning materials in the *Ma'had al Jamiah* English program was systematically aligned with the learning objectives established for each semester. The curriculum was designed progressively according to students' English proficiency levels. In this study, the participants were fourth-semester *santri*, whose learning objectives focused on developing communicative competence while strengthening their understanding of local culture and Islamic values. Consequently, English instruction extended beyond linguistic knowledge by incorporating culturally relevant content that reflected the students' everyday experiences.

A distinctive feature of the instructional materials was the integration of local wisdom into English learning. The materials covered several culturally meaningful themes, including Islamic religious celebrations (e.g., *Eid al-Fitr*, *Eid al-Adha*, *Isra' Mi'raj*, and *Mawlid*), New Year celebrations, traditional dances, and regional foods from different parts of Indonesia. These topics were selected because they were familiar to students from diverse cultural backgrounds while simultaneously introducing them to Indonesia's cultural diversity. During classroom activities, students described religious traditions, compared cultural celebrations, explained traditional dances, and introduced local cuisine using English. Such materials enabled learners to communicate authentic cultural experiences rather than relying solely on topics drawn from English-speaking countries.



Picture 1. Cultural Themes Materials

In addition to cultural content, grammar instruction constituted an essential component of the learning materials. The teaching of grammar was contextualized through texts and communicative tasks related to local wisdom. Rather than learning grammatical structures through isolated drills, students practiced the use of appropriate tenses, sentence structures, and grammatical forms while discussing cultural events and traditions. This contextual approach helped students understand grammar as a tool for meaningful communication instead of a collection of abstract rules.



4. GRAMMAR FOCUS

Will and Going to

Will	Going to
it is used for things we have just decided, predictions based on opinion, giving general information about future.	it is used to talk about plan or something that we are absolutely sure to do in the future.

Will
We will see the movie.
He will come.
I will be there soon.

Going to
We are going to visit Grandma in Australia this summer.
I am going to see Tomi tonight.
Today we are going to discuss about culture.

5. GRAMMAR FOCUS

Gerunds

A. A gerund is the -ing form of verb used as a noun.

Playing basketball is fun.	**Playing** is a gerund. It is used as the subject of the sentence.
We enjoy **playing** basketball.	**Playing** is used as the object of the verb enjoy.
Rizqi is excited about **playing** basketball.	**Playing** is used as the object of the preposition about.

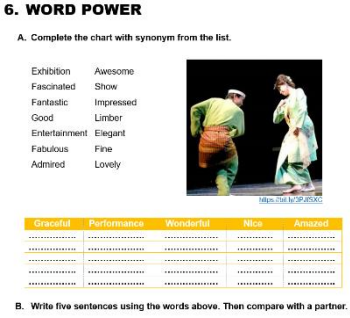
B. Fill the blank by matching with the appropriate words.

- *Finishing - looking - spending - learning - staying*
- *Making - helping - celebrating - playing*

1. Laila is interested in ..... for a new job.
2. Instead of ..... at home, Fatimah went to the Yaa Qowiyyu event.
3. Thanks you for ___ me carry the packages to the Tabot festival.
4. I enjoyed ..... a long night to watch gamelan in Sekaten.
5. ..... English language is difficult for Adam.
6. Nashir went to night market instead of ___ his work.
7. I apologized to Rufaida for ..... her wait for me to go to the *Ikrar Micro*.
8. Siti wants to go Sekaten for ..... some games in the night market.

Picture 2. Grammar Focus

Vocabulary development was likewise embedded within the selected cultural themes. Students acquired lexical items associated with religious practices, festivals, traditional arts, food, tourism, and cultural identity. Because vocabulary was introduced within authentic contexts, students were able to connect new English expressions with their existing cultural knowledge. This contextualization facilitated vocabulary retention and encouraged learners to use newly acquired words during classroom interaction.



6. WORD POWER

A. Complete the chart with synonym from the list.

Exhibition	Awesome
Fascinated	Show
Fantastic	Impressed
Good	Limber
Entertainment	Elegant
Fabulous	Fine
Admired	Lovely

Graceful	Performance	Wonderful	Nice	Amazed
.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
.....	.....	.....	.....	.....

B. Write five sentences using the words above. Then compare with a partner.

Picture 3. Vocabulary

The instructional materials also integrated the four English language skills. Reading activities involved texts describing Indonesian traditions and cultural practices, while writing tasks required students to produce descriptive and explanatory texts about local wisdom. Speaking activities encouraged oral presentations and discussions about regional cultures, whereas listening activities exposed students to English recordings related to cultural topics. The integration of these language skills provided students with multiple opportunities to develop communicative competence through culturally meaningful content.

Table 1. Language Skill Materials

Language Skill	Material
Listening	Islamic New Year and Chinese New Year Learning traditional dances Foods from different places
Reading	Sekaten Symbolizes Confession of Faith Learning Patriotic from *Seudati* dance Food acculturation
Speaking	Conversation of festivals from different places Celebrations from different places Special foods provided in festivals
Writing	Write about some activities that we may do in a festival. Write about experiences of attending to the cultural festival.

Teaching Methods

The findings reveal that English instruction in the *Ma'had* primarily employed three teaching methods: teacher explanation, student presentations, and completing tasks. These methods were implemented sequentially to facilitate students' understanding of both linguistic knowledge and cultural content.

The instructional process typically began with teacher explanations. During this stage, instructors introduced the learning objectives, explained the cultural themes, presented key vocabulary, and clarified grammatical structures relevant to the lesson. Teachers also provided background information about local traditions and religious celebrations before students engaged in communicative activities. This initial explanation established a common understanding and prepared students for subsequent learning tasks.



Picture 4. Explanation

Following the explanation, students participated in presentation activities. Individually or in groups, they presented topics related to local wisdom, such as explaining traditional dances, introducing regional foods, or describing the significance of Islamic celebrations. Presentations encouraged students to organize information, apply grammatical knowledge, and communicate cultural concepts in English. Furthermore, this activity provided opportunities for peer interaction through questions and discussions, thereby fostering students' confidence in public speaking.

Task Instructions

1. **Each student will get ONE different Indonesian traditional dance.**
   You must not choose the same dance as your classmates.
2. **Find basic information about your dance:**
   - Where does the dance come from?
   - When is it performed?
   - Who performs it?
3. **Explain the VALUE and MEANING of the dance**
   (Use simple English sentences)
   - What does the dance show? (e.g., bravery, respect, gratitude, love, heroism)
   - What message does it give to people?
   - Why is it important for the culture?
4. **Prepare a short presentation (4-5 minutes)**
   Your presentation should include:
   - Name of the dance
   - Origin (province/region)
   - Description of the dance
   - The performance of the dance

Picture 5. Presentation Task

The final instructional stage consisted of completing tasks designed to reinforce students' understanding. These exercises included grammar tasks, vocabulary matching activities, reading comprehension questions, short writing assignments, and oral practice. The exercises allowed students to apply newly learned language forms within meaningful cultural contexts. Through repeated practice, students gradually improved their accuracy and fluency while simultaneously strengthening their understanding of local cultural content.



Picture 6. Writing Task

C. Comparative Analysis

Listen both texts carefully. Fill in each column using evidence from the texts. Write brief but analytical answers.

No.	Comparative Focus	Chinese New Year	Islamic New Year / Al-Hijra
1	Calendar System		
2	Basis for Date Change		
3	Duration of Celebration		
4	Emotional Tone (festive, reflective, etc.)		
5	Moral or Personal Renewal		
6	Role of Authority in Determining Date		
7	Symbolic Elements (colors, events, figures)		
8	Public vs. Private Orientation		
9	Concept of Time (cyclical or historical)		

Picture 7. Task on Comparison

Overall, the combination of explanation, presentation, and practice created a structured learning process in which students first acquired knowledge, then demonstrated understanding, and finally consolidated learning through guided practice.

Assessment

The findings indicate that assessment was designed to evaluate students' achievement across the four English language skills: reading, writing, speaking, and

listening. Rather than focusing exclusively on grammatical accuracy, assessment emphasized students' ability to communicate effectively using culturally relevant topics.

Reading assessment measured students' comprehension of texts related to Indonesian culture, religious celebrations, traditional arts, foods, and local traditions. Students demonstrated their understanding by identifying main ideas, interpreting information, and responding to comprehension questions based on culturally contextualized reading passages. Writing assessment required students to produce various forms of written texts, including descriptive and explanatory compositions about regional foods, traditional dances, cultural festivals, and Islamic celebrations. Students were assessed based on content organization, grammatical accuracy, vocabulary use, and coherence in presenting cultural information. Speaking assessment was conducted through classroom presentations, individual performances, and question-and-answer sessions. Students introduced aspects of local wisdom in English, explained cultural practices, and responded to questions from teachers and peers. Assessment criteria included pronunciation, fluency, grammatical accuracy, vocabulary usage, and communicative effectiveness. Listening assessment involved students' comprehension of spoken English related to cultural topics. Learners listened to teacher explanations or audio recordings concerning traditions, festivals, and local cultural practices before completing comprehension tasks. This assessment evaluated students' ability to identify key information, interpret spoken messages, and understand vocabulary in context.

Collectively, these assessment practices demonstrate that English learning in the *Ma'had al Jamiah* emphasized balanced language development across all four language skills while using local wisdom as authentic communicative content. The assessment system therefore reflected not only students' linguistic competence but also their ability to represent Indonesian cultural knowledge through English.



Picture 8. Student's Performance on English Language Skills

The findings demonstrate that English language teaching in the *Ma'had al Jamiah* is organized around three interconnected components. First, learning materials are selected according to semester-based learning objectives and integrate local wisdom themes including Islamic religious celebrations, New Year celebrations, traditional dances, and regional foods with grammar, vocabulary, and the four language skills. Second, instruction follows a structured sequence of teacher explanation, student presentations, and guided practice, enabling learners to acquire and apply English within meaningful cultural contexts. Third, assessment comprehensively evaluates students' reading, writing, speaking, and listening abilities through culturally contextualized tasks. Together, these practices illustrate how English instruction in the *Ma'had al Jamiah* integrates language learning with cultural knowledge, providing a foundation for culturally sustaining English language teaching in Islamic Higher Education.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that English language teaching (ELT) in the *Ma'had* of Islamic Higher Education extends beyond the development of linguistic competence by incorporating local wisdom into instructional materials, classroom practices, and assessment. This integration reflects the principles of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP), which emphasizes that education should preserve and strengthen learners' cultural identities while simultaneously promoting academic achievement (Paris & Editors, 2017). Rather than positioning English as a language detached from students' cultural backgrounds, the *Ma'had* English program situates language learning within contexts that are culturally familiar to *santri*, including Islamic religious celebrations, New Year traditions, traditional dances, and regional foods. Such an approach demonstrates that

English can function as a medium for expressing local identities instead of replacing them with dominant English-speaking cultural norms.

The selection of culturally relevant learning materials confirms previous studies emphasizing the importance of contextualizing ELT through local wisdom. Jaya (2024) argue that integrating local cultural knowledge into English courses increases students' engagement because learning activities become more closely connected to their lived experiences. Similarly, Silva, et al, 2025) found that ethnopedagogical approaches enable learners to develop English proficiency while preserving indigenous cultural values. The present findings extend these studies by showing that local wisdom within the *Ma'had* context encompasses not only regional traditions but also Islamic cultural practices and pesantren values. Consequently, English learning becomes a vehicle through which *santri* communicate their own cultural identities in intercultural settings.

The incorporation of grammar and vocabulary into culturally meaningful contexts also supports current perspectives on communicative language teaching. Rather than presenting grammatical rules as isolated linguistic forms, instructors contextualized grammar within discussions of religious festivals, cultural celebrations, and Indonesian traditions. This finding suggests that language form and cultural content can be learned simultaneously, allowing students to understand grammar as a communicative resource rather than an abstract system. Vocabulary learning similarly benefited from contextualization because students acquired lexical items directly related to their daily experiences and cultural environments. Such contextual learning facilitates deeper vocabulary retention while promoting meaningful language use.

Another significant finding concerns the integration of the four English language skills around shared cultural themes. Reading, writing, speaking, and listening activities were organized using texts and tasks that required students to describe, explain, compare, and present elements of Indonesian culture and Islamic traditions. This integrated-skill approach is consistent with the argument that language learning becomes more authentic when learners engage with meaningful content rather than isolated language exercises. Furthermore, by encouraging students to communicate local wisdom in English, the instructional design contributes to the development of intercultural communicative competence. Zhou et al. (2024) argue that effective EFL instruction should enable

learners not only to communicate accurately but also to represent their own cultural identities in intercultural interactions. The present findings demonstrate how this objective can be achieved within Islamic Higher Education.

The teaching methods observed in the *Ma'had* also reflect important characteristics of culturally responsive instruction. The sequential implementation of teacher explanation, student presentations, and guided practice provides a structured learning process that gradually moves students from knowledge acquisition to active language production. While these methods remain relatively traditional, their effectiveness lies in the use of culturally meaningful content that encourages students to become active participants rather than passive recipients of knowledge. Presentation activities, in particular, enabled *santri* to articulate their cultural experiences and local traditions in English, thereby strengthening both language proficiency and cultural confidence.

Although translanguaging was not formally designed as an instructional strategy, the multilingual context of the *Ma'had* suggests considerable potential for its implementation. Students in Islamic Higher Education commonly possess multiple linguistic resources, including Indonesian, regional languages, Arabic, and English. Recent research has demonstrated that translanguaging practices allow multilingual learners to negotiate meaning more effectively and participate more confidently in English classrooms. Likewise, Zakharova, Yelena and Lasagabaster (2026) conclude that pedagogical translanguaging supports language learning while maintaining learners' linguistic identities. Therefore, future development of the *Ma'had* English program could intentionally incorporate translanguaging practices to maximize students' multilingual repertoires as learning resources. Such an approach aligns closely with CSP by recognizing multilingualism as an educational asset rather than a barrier to English acquisition.

The assessment practices identified in this study further reinforce the culturally sustaining nature of the program. Assessment covered all four English language skills through culturally contextualized tasks, including reading texts about Indonesian traditions, writing descriptive essays on local wisdom, presenting regional culture, and listening to cultural narratives. These authentic assessments measured students' ability to communicate meaningful cultural content rather than merely recalling grammatical

knowledge. Such practices support the notion that assessment should evaluate learners' capacity to apply language in socially and culturally relevant contexts. Moreover, culturally contextualized assessment enables students to demonstrate English proficiency while affirming their cultural identities, an essential principle of culturally sustaining pedagogy.

Taken together, the findings suggest that ELT in the *Ma'had* represents an emerging model of culturally sustaining English language teaching in Islamic Higher Education. By integrating local wisdom into curriculum content, contextualizing grammar and vocabulary instruction, employing culturally relevant teaching methods, and assessing language through authentic cultural tasks, the program positions English as a tool for intercultural communication rather than cultural assimilation. This finding contributes to the growing literature on local wisdom in ELT by extending previous studies beyond public schools and general universities to the unique context of Islamic Higher Education.

More importantly, this study addresses a gap identified in recent scholarship. Although previous research has separately examined local wisdom (Jaya, 2024; Silva et al. 2025), multilingualism (Zakharova & Lasagabaster, 2026), and culturally responsive teaching (Setiawan, S., Rahmadani, N.P., 2026), relatively little attention has been given to how these dimensions intersect within Islamic Higher Education. The *Ma'had* environment provides a distinctive educational setting where multilingual practices, Islamic educational values, and local cultural traditions coexist naturally. Consequently, this study proposes that culturally sustaining English language teaching in Islamic Higher Education should be conceptualized as the integration of local wisdom as instructional content, multilingualism as pedagogical resources, and English as a means of intercultural communication. Such a framework not only supports students' English proficiency but also sustains the linguistic, cultural, and religious identities that characterize *santri* in Indonesian Islamic Higher Education.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that English language teaching in the *Ma'had* of Islamic Higher Education reflects the principles of Culturally Sustaining English Language Teaching by integrating local wisdom into instructional materials, teaching practices, and

assessment. The incorporation of culturally relevant themes including Islamic religious celebrations, New Year traditions, traditional dances, and regional foods provide meaningful contexts through which *santri* develop English proficiency while maintaining their cultural and religious identities. The instructional sequence of teacher explanation, student presentations, and guided practice supports students' communicative development, whereas the assessment of reading, writing, speaking, and listening through culturally contextualized tasks promotes authentic language use. These findings demonstrate that English can function not only as a global means of communication but also as a medium for representing and preserving local cultural knowledge. Furthermore, the multilingual environment of the *Ma'had* offers considerable potential for strengthening culturally sustaining pedagogy through the intentional integration of students' diverse linguistic repertoires. Therefore, this study proposes that English language teaching in Islamic Higher Education should move beyond conventional language instruction toward a pedagogical model that positions local wisdom as the instructional content, multilingualism as the pedagogical resource, and English as the vehicle for intercultural communication. Such an approach contributes to preparing *santri* to participate confidently in global academic communities while sustaining the cultural, linguistic, and religious identities that define Islamic Higher Education in Indonesia.

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