

Students' Perceptions and Appreciation of English Reading Materials Based on Local Wisdom: A Study of Tenth Grade Students at Al-Islam Islamic Boarding School in Tabalong

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ABSTRACT

Sebagian besar pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris di pesantren masih mengadaptasi bahan bacaan bertema Barat yang kurang merepresentasikan konteks sosial, budaya, dan religius santri. Akibatnya, siswa mengalami kesulitan memahami isi teks dan kurang termotivasi untuk membaca. Kajian empiris yang meneliti *persepsi dan apresiasi siswa pesantren terhadap bahan bacaan berbasis kearifan lokal* masih sangat terbatas, terutama pada konteks pesantren di daerah Kalimantan Selatan. Penelitian ini bertujuan mendeskripsikan persepsi dan tingkat apresiasi siswa terhadap bahan bacaan Bahasa Inggris yang mengintegrasikan nilai-nilai kearifan lokal di Pesantren Al-Islam Tabalong. Metode yang digunakan adalah pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif, dengan teknik pengumpulan data melalui angket persepsi, wawancara semi-terstruktur, dan dokumentasi. Informan penelitian melibatkan 30 siswa kelas sepuluh dan 3 guru Bahasa Inggris. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa 85% siswa memiliki persepsi positif terhadap bahan bacaan yang memuat unsur kearifan lokal seperti cerita rakyat, tradisi, dan nilai-nilai keislaman. Siswa menilai teks tersebut lebih mudah dipahami, relevan dengan kehidupan mereka, dan meningkatkan minat membaca. Selain itu, apresiasi budaya siswa juga meningkat karena bahan bacaan dinilai memperkuat identitas keislaman dan keindonesiaan mereka.

Most English language learning in Islamic boarding schools still adapts Western-themed reading materials that do not adequately represent the social, cultural, and religious contexts of the students. As a result, students have difficulty understanding the text and are less motivated to read. Empirical studies examining Islamic boarding school students' perceptions and appreciation of local wisdom-based reading materials are still very limited, especially in the context of Islamic boarding schools in South Kalimantan. This study aims to describe students' perceptions and levels of appreciation of English reading materials that integrate local wisdom values at the Al-Islam Tabalong Islamic Boarding School. The method used is a descriptive qualitative approach, with data collection techniques through perception questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Research informants included 30 tenth-grade students and three English teachers. The results showed that 85% of students had a positive perception of reading materials containing elements of local wisdom such as folktales, traditions, and Islamic values. Students considered these texts easier to understand, relevant to their lives, and increased interest in reading. In addition, students' cultural appreciation also increased because the reading materials were considered to strengthen their Islamic and Indonesian identities.



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INTRODUCTION

English is one of the strategic subjects in the Indonesian education system (Setiawan, 2021), including in Islamic educational institutions such as Islamic boarding schools (Haqiqiyah, 2025; Riscqi et al., 2021). In the context of globalization, mastery of English is considered important for opening access to knowledge and international communication (Subhan, 2024). However, a major challenge faced by teachers and students in Islamic boarding schools is how to make English learning relevant to Islamic values and the local culture of the students (Muid et al., 2024).

So far, most English reading materials in schools and Islamic boarding schools still adopt a Western context that is far from the reality of students' lives in Indonesia (Wijayati et al., 2025). Reading texts often contain stories or themes that are not rooted in local values, such as individualistic lifestyles, non-religious social relationships, or foreign cultural narratives that are unfamiliar to students. This results in low learning engagement, difficulty in understanding the content of the text, and a weak connection between the material being read and the daily experiences of students (Kramsch, 2013; Sumarni et al., 2024). This condition is in line with the findings of Pranajaya et al., (2025) that education based on cultural and family values has a significant impact on increasing the relevance and involvement of students in Islamic educational institutions.

In the context of Islamic boarding schools, students are not only required to master linguistic skills, but are also expected to internalize Islamic moral and spiritual values in all aspects of learning. According to Alwasilah (2022), language learning will be more effective if it is rooted in the culture of the students, because language is not merely a tool of communication, but also a vehicle for identity and value formation. Recent integrative studies also show that aligning learning content with local religious and cultural values can enhance the meaning of learning and the quality of pedagogical interactions (Pranajaya, NZ, et al., 2024; Riwanda et al., 2025). Therefore, efforts to integrate local wisdom into English teaching materials are a strategic approach to overcoming the gap between the cultural context of the text and the real world of students.

Local wisdom in education is defined as a system of values, norms, and cultural practices that have been passed down from generation to generation and contain wisdom for dealing with life's problems. In the context of Islamic boarding schools, local wisdom is not only manifested in social traditions, but also includes religious practices, regional languages, arts, and moral behavior rooted in the values of Islam Nusantara (Setemen et al., 2023). The integration of these elements in English language learning not only enriches the learning context but also serves as a means of cultural preservation and character building for students.

Previous studies have emphasized the importance of a culturally-based approach in language teaching. Carrell & Eisterhold (1983) explain that reading comprehension is highly dependent on the reader's background knowledge and cultural schemata. If the context of the reading material is close to the reader's life, the process of activating schemata becomes easier, thereby improving comprehension. In the context of Islamic boarding school education, this means that when students read English texts containing local stories, Islamic values, or stories of local community figures, they are better able to understand the content of the reading deeply because their experiences and value systems are relevant to the content of the text.

Unfortunately, this practice is still rarely done systematically in Islamic boarding schools, especially in South Kalimantan. The majority of English teachers still rely on general textbooks from national publishers that do not contain elements of local wisdom. This shows a research gap between contextual learning needs and teaching practices that still tend to be generic. Research examining students' perceptions of reading materials based on local wisdom in Islamic boarding schools is still very limited, even though the social and religious contexts of Islamic boarding school students in Indonesia are very diverse. This is in line with the meta-analysis of Pranajaya, Zulfikar, et al. (2024) which emphasized that research on the integration of religiosity, culture, and learning in Islamic institutions is still very limited in terms of methodology and regional context.

Al-Islam Tabalong Islamic Boarding School is one of the modern Islamic educational institutions that strives to integrate local cultural values into English language learning. This boarding school develops reading materials that highlight Kalimantan folklore, local religious figures, and community traditions such as mutual cooperation, deliberation, and Banjar customs that are in line with Islamic values. This step is in line with the national culture-based character education policy launched by the

Ministry of Education and Culture (Ali et al., 2021) and supports the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) point 4 on inclusive and culturally relevant quality education.

However, even though the initiative to integrate reading materials based on local wisdom has begun to be implemented, it is still necessary to understand scientifically how students interpret these experiences. Student perceptions are key to assessing the success of implementing locally-based teaching materials. Positive perceptions indicate high acceptance and engagement in learning, while negative perceptions indicate barriers to understanding or acceptance of the materials used. In this context, cultural appreciation is also an important indicator. Students who have a high appreciation for local values tend to show better learning motivation and pride in their cultural identity (Abidinsyah et al., n.d.; Brown, 1994).

Previous studies, such as those conducted by Nugraha et al. (2022) and Rachmawati et al., (2022), have proven that the use of local reading texts can increase student engagement and critical thinking skills. However, both studies were conducted in public schools, not Islamic boarding schools. Therefore, there is a need for a study that specifically explores the perceptions and appreciation of Islamic boarding school students towards English reading materials based on local wisdom in order to find a language learning model that is truly contextual to the character of Islamic boarding school students and Indonesian Islamic culture.

This study has novelty in two main aspects. First, this study focuses on the context of pesantren education in South Kalimantan, which is still rarely used as a locus for research on English learning based on local wisdom. Second, this study combines the analysis of students' perceptions and cultural appreciation simultaneously—two dimensions that complement each other in understanding the impact of using teaching materials based on local values on the character formation of santri.

The main objective of this study is to describe in depth the perceptions and appreciation of tenth-grade students at the Al-Islam Tabalong Islamic Boarding School towards English reading materials that contain elements of local wisdom. Through a descriptive qualitative approach, this study seeks to explore the meanings, motivations, and views of students towards the texts used in learning.

Theoretically, this study is expected to enrich the study of cultural literacy and context-based English language teaching in Islamic education. In practical terms, the results of this study provide recommendations to English teachers in Islamic boarding schools to develop teaching materials that are in line with local and Islamic values. In addition, this study contributes to national efforts to build character education rooted in national culture, while strengthening Islamic identity within the framework of nationality.

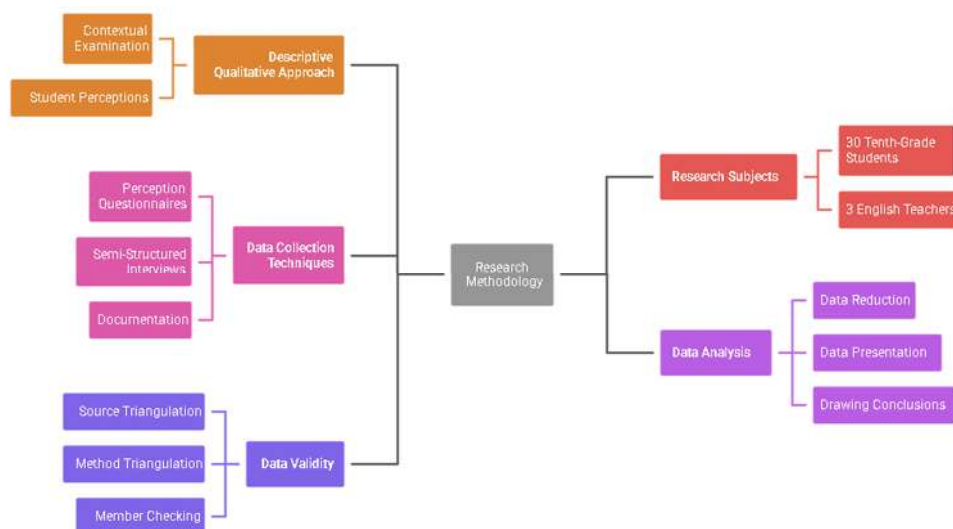
Thus, this study not only addresses the empirical gap regarding the lack of studies on Islamic boarding school students' perceptions of reading materials based on local wisdom, but also provides a conceptual contribution to the development of a contextual, character-building, and culturally-aware English learning model.

Based on these conditions, this study seeks to:

1. Describe students' perceptions of English reading materials based on local wisdom; and
2. Describe the level of students' appreciation of local cultural values in reading texts.

METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach, with the aim of understanding the phenomenon in depth based on the experiences and views of the research subjects (Creswell, 2017). This approach is very relevant for examining students' perceptions and appreciation in a contextual manner. The research subjects consisted of 30 tenth-grade students and 3 English teachers who were directly involved in learning activities using reading materials based on local wisdom.



Data were collected through three main techniques:

1. Perception questionnaires, to identify students' general views on the relevance, ease, and benefits of local-based reading materials.
2. Semi-structured interviews, to explore a deeper understanding of the meaning and experiences of students when reading the text.
3. Documentation, in the form of teaching materials, student assignments, and teacher reflection notes.

Data analysis was conducted using the Miles et al. (2014) model, which consists of three stages:

1. Data reduction – selecting and grouping important information from questionnaires and interviews.
2. Data presentation – compiling findings into thematic tables such as positive perceptions, learning motivation, and appreciation of local values.
3. Drawing conclusions – interpreting the meaning of the data based on the context of Islamic boarding school education.

Data validity was ensured through source triangulation (students and teachers), method triangulation (questionnaires, interviews, documentation), and member checking by confirming the interpretation results with the informants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Students' Perceptions of Reading Materials Based on Local Wisdom

Based on the results of questionnaires, interviews, and documentation, this study found that most tenth-grade students at Al-Islam Tabalong Islamic Boarding School had very positive perceptions of English reading materials that contained elements of local wisdom. Of the 30 students, 85% stated that local-based texts were easier to understand, interesting, and relevant to their lives as Islamic boarding school students. This data was obtained from the analysis of the perception questionnaire percentages and was reinforced by in-depth interviews.

This finding is due to the closeness between the content of the text and the students' daily experiences. Many students are familiar with local stories, religious values, and the characters in the stories. For example, some of the texts used by teachers contain stories of local religious figures in South Kalimantan and regional legends such as “Gunung Batu Bini.” When encountering such texts, students already have prior knowledge, so the process of understanding the content of the reading feels easier.

Student S-07 said that reading local stories was “easier because they already knew the content of the story.” Meanwhile, student S-12 emphasized that local texts “made learning more comfortable and did not conflict with the values of the Islamic boarding school.”

Teacher G-02 confirmed that compared to Western-themed readings, local texts were “more easily accepted” by students. In the learning documentation, the teacher noted that students seemed more enthusiastic when given texts related to local culture, Islamic values, and the activities of Tabalong

society.

Students' Cultural Appreciation of Local-Based Texts

The study also found that students' cultural appreciation of texts based on local wisdom was quite high. Students admitted that reading local stories strengthened their pride in their regional culture and Islamic identity. There are four indicators of cultural appreciation that were found: a). Cultural pride: Students feel proud when reading local stories in English; b). Relevance of moral values: Students acknowledge that local texts contain moral and Islamic values that are in line with pesantren life; c). Strengthening of identity, Santri feel that local readings “do not violate Islamic values,” so they are more morally safe. This is in line with Pranajaya, Rijal, et al. (2024) argument that the integration of Islamic values in the learning process plays a direct role in the formation of students' academic and religious identities; and d). Emotional involvement: Many students feel emotionally connected because the texts remind them of the advice of their parents or religious teachers. This emotional involvement is also in line with research by Pranajaya, Ilmiah, et al. (2024) which shows that learning materials that are affectively close increase emotional warmth and students' readiness to learn.

Student S-21 said:

“When reading local stories, I feel like I am learning English but still being myself.”

Teacher G-01 added that local texts “help students understand that learning a foreign language does not mean abandoning cultural and religious values.”

Factors that Shape Positive Perceptions and Appreciation

Thematic analysis by Miles et al. (2014) identifies four main factors:

1. Cultural context familiarity. Local texts contain traditions, social values, community figures, and Islamic contexts that are very familiar to students. This familiarity reduces the cognitive load when reading;
2. Alignment with Islamic values. Local texts do not contain content that conflicts with Sharia values or pesantren culture, making students feel more comfortable;
3. The role of teachers in adapting materials. Teachers select local texts and adapt them to students' language proficiency levels. The active role of teachers in adapting these reading materials is in line with the netnographic study of Islamic learning which emphasizes the importance of teacher agency in managing contextual and relevant learning resources Pranajaya, Cahyadi, et al. (2024). Teachers also relate the content of the texts to the lives of santri; and
4. Narrative familiarity. Students are often already familiar with the storyline, which speeds up language comprehension.

Obstacles Encountered

Several obstacles were identified in the study: The availability of local teaching materials is limited, so teachers must adapt the manual; Certain vocabulary is still difficult, because some local cultural translations do not have direct English equivalents; and Students with low abilities require more intensive assistance. These obstacles are technical in nature and do not diminish the students' overall positive perception.

Discussion

Research Findings in the Perspective of Reading Theory and Culture

The finding that students find it easier to understand texts based on local wisdom reinforces fundamental concepts in reading theory, particularly Schema Theory (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983), Cultural Schema (Steffensen et al., 1979), and Interactive Reading Models (Rumelhart, 2022).

Steffensen et al. (1979) even proved through experiments that readers who read texts that are familiar to their cultural background (culture-familiar texts) are able to: a). Remember more details; b). Understand the plot better; and c). Read with a lower level of cognitive processing.

These findings indicate that santri students understand local texts more quickly because: a). The plot is familiar; b). The cultural and religious values match their own values; and c). The social structure in the text reflects the reality of the pesantren.

Thus, the results of this study not only confirm classical theory, but also expand our understanding of how schemas work in the context of Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia, a context that has not been widely studied in global literature.

Language, Identity, and Agency of Santri

The concept that language shapes identity (Kramsch, 2013) is highly relevant to the findings of

this study. Santri not only learn language as a technical skill, but also build what Gee (2000) calls “identity enactment through discourse”—that is, language as a means of positioning oneself in society.

In the context of Islamic boarding schools, English is often considered a foreign language that is “far” from Islamic culture. However, when presented in a local context, this language becomes part of santri identity. Students do not feel a loss of identity when reading English texts that have Islamic and local value.

Thus, the integration of local texts provides space for santri cultural agency, namely their ability to negotiate their identity in foreign language learning. This is an important scientific contribution of this research.

Local Wisdom as the Foundation of Critical Literacy

The results of the study can also be analyzed from a critical literacy perspective (Freire, 1970; Luke, 2018). Freire emphasizes that learning should be liberating, start from the reality of students' lives, and connect texts with the social structures of life.

In this study, local-based texts: a). Describe the reality of Tabalong society; b). Contain Islamic values, morality, and social life; and c). Enable students to compare the world of texts with the real world.

Thus, students not only read but also critique, reflect, and connect the values of the text with their lives. This is a process of critical literacy that is very valuable in Islamic education.

Contextual Learning: Integration of Language–Culture–Religion

The use of local texts proves the effectiveness of Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) (Johnson, 2002). CTL emphasizes: Learning that is related to life experiences; Active student involvement; and then Social context relevance.

Teachers in this study have applied CTL naturally by Connecting readings to life in Islamic boarding schools, Using examples of local culture, and linking stories to religious and social values. All of this increases student engagement, which is in line with Guthrie & Wigfield's (2000) theory of engagement in literacy.

The Perspective of Islamic Boarding School Education and Values-Based Curriculum

The discussion will be enriched by referring to the thoughts of Azra (2014) and Dhofier (1982) on pesantren culture, which emphasizes: Moral values, Scholarship, Community, The role of teachers (Kiai/Ustaz), and then Learning etiquette.

The findings of this study indicate that local texts:

1. Do not conflict with pesantren etiquette,
2. In fact reinforce pesantren values, and
3. Become a means of internalizing Islamic morals and culture.

Thus, English language learning becomes a means of etiquette literacy, not merely language literacy.

Theoretical Contribution of the Research

This research has scientific novelty in four aspects:

1. The Context of Islamic Boarding Schools as English Reading Spaces. There has been little international research exploring how santri read EFL texts based on local wisdom in the context of Islamic boarding schools.
2. Integration of Local Values, Religion, and Language. This study shows that the integration of local values and Islam improves: understanding, motivation, engagement, and learning identity. This is also in line with the findings of Pranajaya, Idris, et al. (2024) that strengthening cultural values and religiosity in learning contributes directly to the formation of learning resilience (academic resilience) in students in Islamic educational institutions. This expands on the concept of culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018).
3. Strong Empirical Findings on the “Cultural Comfort Zone”. This study introduces the concept that santri read better when the text is within their cultural comfort zone.
4. New Learning Model: “Local-Wisdom-based EFL Reading Model for Islamic Boarding Schools”. By integrating: schema theory, contextual learning, character education, cultural identity theory

This research can give rise to a new theoretical model for EFL learning in Islamic boarding schools.

Theoretical Implications

The theoretical implications of this study are as follows:

1. Expansion of schema theory in the context of Islam Nusantara. These findings show that cultural schemas are not monolithic but are bound to local Islamic values.
2. Refining the concept of “cultural-religious readability”. Texts that are culturally and religiously appropriate enhance understanding.
3. EFL model based on local pesantren wisdom. This research can serve as a theoretical basis for the national pesantren curriculum.
4. Integration of cultural literacy into the EFL curriculum. Language is not merely a tool, but a bridge for values, morals, and culture.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of descriptive qualitative research involving 30 students and 3 English teachers at Al-Islam Tabalong Islamic Boarding School, it can be concluded that English reading materials based on local wisdom were very positively received by students and considered relevant to the context of boarding school life. A total of 85% of students stated that texts containing folk tales, Banjar traditions, and Islamic values were easier to understand, more interesting, and increased their motivation to read compared to Western-themed texts that have dominated textbooks.

This study also shows that students' cultural appreciation has increased significantly. Students feel proud when their regional culture is presented in English lessons, and they see that the local values introduced through these texts are in line with their Islamic identity. Thus, the use of reading materials based on local wisdom not only improves linguistic skills but also strengthens students' cultural awareness, moral character, and self-confidence as Islamic boarding school students.

The novelty of this study lies in the simultaneous integration of linguistic perception and cultural appreciation in the context of Islamic boarding schools, as well as empirical evidence that English language learning that incorporates local values is an effective approach that can bridge the gap between the culture of the text and the reality of the students' lives. This study broadens the understanding of the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy in Islamic education, particularly in English language learning in Islamic boarding schools.

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