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Between Innovation and Tradition: Teachers' and Students' Perceptions of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in *Pesantren* English Classrooms

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Abstract
This study explores the perceptions, pedagogical challenges, and integration strategies of teachers and students regarding the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in English language classrooms within a *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) context. Employing a case study design with a phenomenological lens, this research aims to uncover how AI-based tools are received and interpreted amidst the daily learning experiences of a single *pesantren*. Data are collected through semi-structured interviews and reflective observations, while acknowledging the researcher's dual positionality as both an insider and observer to ensure a nuanced interpretation of the findings. The study focuses on both the pedagogical benefits and the cultural tensions between technological innovation and traditional religious values. The findings are expected to offer a framework for culturally responsive AI integration in language education, specifically contributing to the discourse of digital literacy within Islamic educational settings.

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1. Introduction

Language is a fundamental tool for human communication, cultural expression, and intellectual development. It enables individuals to convey thoughts, emotions, and intentions, while also shaping identity and social interaction. In educational contexts, language plays a central role not only as a medium of instruction but also as a subject of study that reflects the values and aspirations of a society.

In *pesantren* settings, English language instruction often coexists with a strong emphasis on religious studies, creating a unique pedagogical landscape. Teachers must navigate limited instructional time, diverse learner backgrounds, and the need to align language content with Islamic values. Speaking practice, in particular, is frequently constrained by curriculum priorities and learners' hesitancy to express themselves in a foreign language, especially in front of peers or authority figures (Yunus & Suliman, 2023; Albirini, 2024).

Among the many languages spoken globally, English has emerged as a dominant international language, widely used in diplomacy, science, business, and education. Its status as a global lingua franca has led to the proliferation of English language teaching (ELT) programs across diverse cultural and institutional settings. In Indonesia, English is taught as a foreign language and is considered a key competency for academic and professional advancement.

The teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) involves the development of four core skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Among these, speaking is often regarded as the most challenging yet essential skill, as it requires real-time processing, confidence, and interaction. Effective speaking instruction demands not only linguistic input but also opportunities for practice, feedback, and meaningful communication.

These challenges are further amplified in *pesantren* environments, where oral expression is often shaped by norms of modesty, respect, and communal harmony. Students may avoid speaking English not only due to linguistic limitations but also because of social dynamics that discourage risk-taking. In such contexts, AI-based speaking tools offer a potential bridge, providing private, low-stakes opportunities for learners to rehearse and refine their speech without fear of judgment or disruption to cultural expectations (Pituxcoosuvarn et al., 2025).

In recent years, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has offered new possibilities for enhancing speaking instruction. AI-powered tools such as ChatGPT, Elsa Speak, and Quillbot provide learners with interactive platforms to practice pronunciation, receive instant feedback, and engage in simulated conversations. These technologies promise personalized learning experiences and increased learner autonomy, especially in contexts where access to qualified instructors is limited. According to UNESCO (2024), over 60% of educational institutions in Southeast Asia have begun experimenting with AI-based learning tools, a regional shift toward technology-enhanced pedagogy (Selwyn, 2023).

While AI adoption in Southeast Asia is accelerating, its implementation in *pesantren* remains underexplored. Most available tools are designed for mainstream or secular classrooms, often overlooking the cultural and ethical dimensions that shape learning in faith-based institutions. This oversight is highlighted in recent mapping of educational research, which suggests that while technological studies are booming, there is still a significant lack of focus on how these innovations align with specific religious and local values (Agustina, 2024). This aligns with the need for context-specific strategies in language instruction within the *pesantren* environment. This study responds to that gap by examining how AI is perceived and negotiated within a *pesantren* context, where innovation must harmonize with tradition.

The integration of AI into ELT has gained increasing attention in recent literature. Afrianto et al. (2025) emphasize that while AI offers pedagogical benefits such as instant feedback, learner autonomy, and increased engagement, its implementation must be context-sensitive. They argue that "AI integration in ELT should not be merely technological, but pedagogically and ethically grounded, especially in culturally rich learning environments." The British Council (2023) similarly highlights the importance of developing AI literacy among both educators and learners, suggesting that AI systems are particularly effective in handling procedural knowledge and language patterns, making them suitable for tasks such as pronunciation practice, grammar correction, and conversation (Kundu & Bej, 2025; Koylu, 2025).

A study published in the Journal of Educational Technology (2025) found that AI-driven speaking tools significantly improved learners' fluency and confidence in EFL classrooms, especially when combined with teacher scaffolding and reflective feedback. However, the study also noted challenges related to digital literacy, access to devices, and cultural acceptance of AI in traditional learning settings. Despite these advancements, there remains a gap in the literature concerning the use of AI in faith-based institutions such as *pesantren*. Most existing studies focus on mainstream or urban educational contexts, leaving the unique pedagogical and cultural dynamics of *pesantren* underexplored (Santosa, 2017; Santosa, 2020).

Pesantren, as Islamic boarding schools rooted in tradition and religious values, present a distinctive educational landscape. While AI may enhance English language instruction, it also raises questions about appropriateness, acceptance, and alignment with *pesantren* norms. Teachers and students may experience tensions between embracing innovation and preserving established educational values. These tensions are not merely technical but deeply pedagogical and cultural, requiring nuanced exploration (Santosa, 2019).

Despite the surge of research on Artificial Intelligence in English Language Teaching (ELT), most existing studies have focused on secular or mainstream academic institutions, leaving a significant gap in understanding how AI is navigated within faith-based educational environments.

In the specific context of the *pesantren*, where learning is deeply rooted in traditional values and moral character building, the integration of AI presents unique challenges that remain under-explored. Current literature often fails to account for the cultural and spiritual negotiations that occur when global technological innovations intersect with local religious pedagogies. Consequently, this study is framed within a case study approach with a phenomenological lens to explore the lived experiences of teachers and students at Pesantren Darul-Muttaqien. By foregrounding these often-marginalized voices, the research seeks to fill this lacuna, offering context-sensitive insights that are essential for developing pedagogical models where technological advancement does not compromise cultural integrity.

This study aims to investigate how AI tools can practically support and extend students' speaking abilities through interactive and mediated learning experiences. Specifically, the research seeks to examine how these digital tools function as supportive aids that adapt to a learner's current proficiency level while fostering meaningful social interaction in the classroom. Furthermore, the study intends to explore how AI can be integrated in a way that respects and incorporates the unique cultural identities and religious values of the *pesantren* community. By focusing on these objectives, the research strives to develop instructional approaches that harmonize modern technological assistance with the specific cultural requirements of Islamic education.

2. Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research design using a phenomenological case study approach to explore how teachers and students in a *pesantren* perceive the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in English language learning. The phenomenological lens allows the researcher to uncover lived experiences and personal meanings constructed by participants within their educational context. This approach is particularly suitable for capturing nuanced reflections and cultural considerations in faith-based institutions such as *pesantren.*

The phenomenological case study approach was chosen not only for its capacity to capture lived experiences, but also for its alignment with the epistemological stance of the researcher. In *pesantren* contexts, where meaning is often constructed through reflection, dialogue, and spiritual engagement, phenomenology allows for a deeper understanding of how participants interpret their interactions with AI. This approach foregrounds participant voice and cultural nuance, making it particularly suitable for faith-based educational settings.

2.1 Setting of The Study and Participants

The research was conducted at Pondok Pesantren Darul-Muttaqien NWDI Perian in East Lombok, West Nusa Tenggara. This site was selected as it integrates English instruction into its curriculum and has proactively adopted AI tools such as ChatGPT and Elsa Speak. The participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure a diverse range of perspectives. The teacher cohort (n=4) included both senior educators with extensive pedagogical experience and junior teachers who are early adopters of educational technology. Meanwhile, the student participants (n=8) comprised learners from Grades 9 through 12, representing varying levels of English proficiency and AI exposure, ranging from frequent users to those with limited experience. All participants were fully informed of the study's purpose and provided voluntary consent, ensuring that the reflective dialogues captured a comprehensive view of the *pesantren's* digital landscape

The selected participants represented a diverse range of *pesantren* roles and experiences. Teachers included both senior instructors with over a decade of teaching experience and younger educators recently trained in digital pedagogy. Students ranged from Grade 9 to Grade 12, with varying degrees of exposure to AI tools. This diversity enabled the study to capture a spectrum of perceptions, from cautious skepticism to enthusiastic adoption, thereby enriching the thematic depth of the findings.

2.2 Data Collection

Data for this study were collected through a triangulated approach involving semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and researcher field notes. The semi-structured interviews, lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes each, were conducted in a private setting to encourage openness; these served to address the research question regarding participants' internal perceptions and the ethical-cultural tensions they experience. To complement these self-reported views, direct classroom observations were carried out over a four-week period, specifically focusing on the actual integration of AI tools during speaking activities. This method provided objective data on pedagogical strategies and spontaneous teacher-student interactions that interviews alone might miss. Finally, field notes and reflective memos were systematically recorded after each session to capture contextual nuances and maintain a transparent record of the researcher's positionality. By integrating these three methods, the study ensures that the findings are not only grounded in participant testimony but also validated by observed classroom realities

2.3 Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2019): familiarization with data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Themes were developed inductively, grounded in participants' narratives, and interpreted through a phenomenological lens. During the coding process, the researcher engaged in iterative memo-writing to document emerging patterns. These memos served as a bridge between raw data and thematic interpretation, allowing for a transparent trace of how analytic decisions were formed.

2.3.1 Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, this study employed member checking, triangulation, and a detailed audit trail. Member checking involved sharing summaries of interview responses with participants to validate the accuracy of their testimonies. Data triangulation was achieved by cross-verifying emerging themes across multiple sources: interviews, observations, and field notes. Furthermore, an audit trail was maintained to document every stage of the coding process and analytic shifts, thereby enhancing the study's transparency and credibility.

2.3.2 Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

As a teacher-researcher embedded within the *pesantren* context, the researcher maintained a dual positionality as both an insider familiar with institutional norms and an observer reflecting on pedagogical shifts. While this "insider" status provided privileged access to cultural subtleties, it also required rigorous reflexivity to mitigate over-identification and bias. To navigate these complexities, the researcher maintained a reflective journal to document moments of tension or uncertainty. Additionally, peer debriefing with educators outside the *pesantren* context was conducted to challenge interpretations and ensure that the analysis remained both empathetic and methodologically rigorous.

3. Results

Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, four major themes emerged that illuminate the pedagogical, cultural, and technological dimensions of AI integration at Pesantren Darul-Muttaqien. First, AI functioned as a 'digital scaffold' for speaking, providing a low-anxiety environment that boosted student confidence. Second, participants experienced 'techno-cultural friction,' where the autonomous nature of AI occasionally clashed with the traditional teacher-centered authority of the pesantren. Third, there was a noticeable 'localization of AI use,' as teachers adapted prompts to include Islamic themes and local values to ensure cultural relevance. Finally, the study identified an 'emerging digital agency' among students, who began to view AI not just as a tool, but as a gateway to global English discourse. These themes reveal that AI integration is not a neutral process; rather, it is a complex negotiation where participants actively reshape technological use to align with their spiritual and educational identities.

Table
Summary of Key Themes and Pedagogical Implications

Main Theme	Dimensions Involved	Pedagogical Implications
AI as a Confidence Booster in Speaking	Psychological, Affective	AI creates a safe space for speaking practice, increasing student participation and autonomy.
Cultural and Ethical Boundaries in AI Use	Cultural, Moral	AI content must be adapted to reflect *pesantren* values and local norms.
Digital Literacy and Access Gaps	Technological, Social	Training and infrastructure are needed to ensure equitable access and engagement.
Teacher Mediation and Pedagogical Integration	Instructional, Relational	AI should support, not replace, teachers, with guided integration into classroom practice.

4. Discussion

Following the identification of four key themes through thematic analysis, the next section elaborates on each theme in depth. Rather than merely presenting findings, this discussion connects them to theoretical frameworks and the *pesantren* context, illustrating how perceptions of AI in English speaking instruction are shaped by psychological, cultural, technological, and pedagogical dynamics. Each theme is explored reflectively to uncover broader implications for language teaching in faith-based educational environments.

Theme 1: AI as a Confidence Booster in Speaking Practice

For many students, the introduction of AI-based speaking tools marked a turning point in their relationship with English speaking. Prior to using the tools, students often described speaking English as a source of anxiety, embarrassment, and self-doubt. The presence of peers and teachers during speaking tasks heightened their fear of making mistakes, leading to silence or rote responses. However, when practicing with AI applications, students reported feeling more relaxed, autonomous, and willing to experiment with language.

"I feel more relaxed speaking to the app than to my teacher. I can make mistakes without feeling embarrassed." — Student, S10

The AI tools provided a private, non-judgmental space where students could rehearse, repeat, and reflect on their speaking performance without social pressure. This shift in emotional climate was also observed by teachers, who noted increased participation and confidence among previously quiet students.

"Some of my students started volunteering to speak after practicing with the app. It seems to help them build confidence." — Teacher, T10

This theme suggests that AI can function as a psychological scaffold, enabling students to overcome affective barriers and engage more fully in speaking tasks. The tools did not merely provide linguistic input; they created conditions for emotional safety and self-directed learning.

Several students also described how the app's ability to repeat prompts and provide instant feedback helped them internalize sentence patterns and pronunciation. This repetition, free from social scrutiny, allowed them to experiment with intonation and vocabulary more freely. Teachers observed that students who previously avoided speaking tasks began initiating conversations in English during informal moments, such as after class or during group discussions. These

behavioral shifts suggest that AI tools may foster not only linguistic competence but also a sense of ownership over one's learning process.

The increased confidence observed among students aligns with Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where learners benefit from mediated support that bridges the gap between current ability and potential development. AI tools, when used privately and repetitively, function as mediational artifacts that reduce affective filters and foster risk-taking in language production. This finding suggests that emotional safety is not peripheral to speaking instruction, it is foundational, especially in *pesantren* contexts where modesty and self-restraint are culturally valued.

This finding aligns with previous research by Krashen (1982) on the Affective Filter Hypothesis, and more recently, Hwang et al. (2023), who found that AI-based voice assistants provide a 'safe harbor' for learners, significantly reducing anxiety compared to face-to-face interactions. Similarly, a study by Chiu et al. (2020) demonstrated that the non-judgmental nature of AI allows students to engage in 'trial and error' without the fear of social evaluation, which is particularly prevalent in collective learning cultures like the *pesantren*

Theme 2: Cultural and Ethical Boundaries in Technology Use

While students generally welcomed the novelty of AI, teachers expressed critical reflections on the cultural appropriateness of certain features. Some AI platforms included avatars, voice assistants, or dialogue prompts that were perceived as misaligned with *pesantren* values. Teachers raised concerns about content that referenced dating, parties, or casual speech styles, which they felt could undermine the moral and spiritual ethos of the institution.

"We need to make sure the content reflects our values. Some voices sound too casual or inappropriate for our setting." — Teacher, T9

Students also noticed thematic dissonance between the AI-generated scenarios and their lived realities. Although they appreciated the opportunity to speak, they sometimes felt disconnected from the topics presented.

"The app asked me to talk about dating and parties. That's not something we usually discuss here." — Student, S9

This theme highlights the importance of cultural contextualization in educational technology. In pesantren, where learning is deeply embedded in religious and communal frameworks, AI tools must be adapted to reflect local norms, sensitivities, and pedagogical goals. The ethical dimension of technology use is not peripheral, it is central to its acceptance and effectiveness.

Teachers emphasized the need for localized content curation, suggesting that AI developers collaborate with educators to design modules that reflect *pesantren* realities such as themes of cooperation, modesty, and spiritual reflection. One teacher proposed integrating Islamic values into dialogue prompts, such as discussing community service or ethical dilemmas, to make speaking practice both linguistically and morally enriching. These suggestions reflect a desire to move beyond rejection of inappropriate content toward proactive adaptation of AI for culturally grounded pedagogy.

The ethical concerns raised by teachers reflect a broader tension between globalized content and localized values. Culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2018) emphasizes the need for instructional materials that affirm learners' identities and moral frameworks. In *pesantren*, where education is intertwined with spiritual formation, AI tools must be curated to avoid cultural dissonance. This calls for collaborative design between educators and developers, ensuring that technology serves, not disrupts the moral ecology of the classroom.

Educational technology research emphasizes the importance of contextual relevance, where pedagogical tools must align not only with learners' linguistic needs but also with their cultural frameworks. As Adnyani (2025) argues, neglecting local values in the design of educational technology risks reducing its pedagogical effectiveness and cultural legitimacy. This perspective is particularly significant in *pesantren* education, where ethical and spiritual dimensions are inseparable from instructional practices. Thus, the integration of artificial intelligence in such

contexts requires not only technical accuracy but also sensitivity to local traditions and values to ensure meaningful and sustainable learning outcomes.

The 'techno-cultural friction' identified here resonates with the findings of Al-Hoorie et al. (2021), who argued that many ELT technologies carry inherent Western secular biases that may clash with conservative educational settings. Furthermore, Musa & Ziatdinov (2024) emphasized that in Islamic educational contexts, the acceptance of AI is highly contingent on its 'ethical compatibility' with religious values. This confirms that pedagogical tools are never value-neutral and must be filtered through the local 'moral ecology' as observed in this study

Theme 3: Digital Literacy and Access Gaps

The implementation of AI-based speaking tools revealed significant disparities in digital access and literacy among students. While some students had personal smartphones and stable internet connections, others relied on borrowed devices or faced infrastructural limitations. These differences affected not only the frequency of practice but also the depth of engagement with the tools.

"I only use the app when I borrow my brother's phone. At school, the internet is slow." — Student, S12

Teachers themselves varied in their familiarity with AI platforms. Some were enthusiastic and proactive, while others felt uncertain and underprepared. This unevenness created challenges in classroom integration and student support.

"I'm still learning how to use the platform myself. I need training before I can fully support my students." — Teacher, T12

This theme underscores the need for infrastructural investment and professional development. Without adequate access and guidance, the pedagogical potential of AI remains unevenly distributed, reinforcing existing educational inequalities.

The digital divide also manifested in students' ability to navigate app interfaces. Some students struggled with basic commands, such as adjusting microphone settings or accessing feedback history. Teachers noted that digital literacy was not evenly distributed, even among students of similar age and academic level. This finding highlights the importance of embedding digital skills training within language instruction, ensuring that AI tools do not inadvertently privilege tech-savvy learners while marginalizing others.

The disparities in access and digital fluency highlight the risk of deepening educational inequality through technology. While AI promises personalized learning, its benefits are contingent on infrastructural readiness and user competence. In *pesantren,* where resources may be unevenly distributed, AI integration must be accompanied by capacity-building initiatives. This includes teacher training, device provision, and digital literacy workshops that empower all learners to engage meaningfully with technological tools.

The disparities observed in this study mirror the 'global digital divide' highlighted by Warschauer (2003) and more recently by Shin et al. (2022), who noted that AI-driven personalization often inadvertently privileges students with high socio-economic status and better technical literacy. In the Indonesian context, Surani (2020) found that infrastructural constraints in rural educational institutions remain a primary barrier to the sustainable adoption of 4.0 technologies, echoing the challenges faced by students at Pesantren Darul-Muttaqien.

Theme 4: Teacher Mediation and Pedagogical Integration

Across interviews, both students and teachers emphasized that AI tools should not replace human instruction, but rather complement it. Teachers played a crucial role in selecting appropriate materials, contextualizing feedback, and guiding students through the learning process. When AI tasks were integrated into classroom activities with teacher facilitation, students reported deeper understanding and greater motivation.

"It's better when we use the app together in class. I understand more when the teacher explains first." — Student, S11

Teachers also viewed AI as a tool for differentiation, allowing them to tailor speaking practice to individual student needs. However, they cautioned against overreliance on technology without pedagogical framing.

"The app is useful, but students still need explanation and encouragement from us." — Teacher, T11

This theme affirms that successful AI integration depends not only on the technology itself, but on the pedagogical ecosystem in which it is embedded. Teacher mediation ensures that AI use remains purposeful, ethical, and aligned with learning objectives.

In some cases, teachers used AI-generated dialogues as springboards for classroom debates, encouraging students to critique or expand on the scenarios. This practice not only deepened comprehension but also fostered critical thinking and contextual awareness. Teachers reported that when AI tasks were framed as collaborative explorations rather than isolated drills, students became more engaged and reflective. These observations reinforce the idea that AI's pedagogical value is maximized when embedded within dialogic, teacher-led learning environments.

The role of teachers as mediators reinforces the idea that AI is most effective when embedded within a relational pedagogy. Rather than replacing instruction, AI can extend it, providing differentiated practice, modeling, and feedback that teachers can contextualize. This echoes Afrianto et al. (2025), who argue that AI must be pedagogically grounded and ethically framed. In *pesantren*, teacher mediation ensures that technology remains aligned with communal values and instructional goals, transforming AI from a tool of efficiency into a companion for meaningful learning.

As noted by Prof. Ni Nyoman Padmadewi, M.A., Ph.D., during a lecture at Undiksha, "In language education, especially within culturally rooted institutions, teachers are not only facilitators of skill, they are guardians of meaning. Their mediation ensures that technology supports character development, not just competence." This insight reinforces the idea that AI must be pedagogically framed and ethically guided, especially in *pesantren* contexts where language learning is inseparable from moral formation.

Collectively, these themes reveal that AI integration in *pesantren* English classrooms is not a linear process of adoption, but a layered negotiation of pedagogical, cultural, and relational factors. Teachers and students do not merely respond to technology, they reshape its meaning through their values, practices, and interactions. This underscores the need for context-sensitive frameworks that honor the complexity of faith-based education, positioning AI not as a disruptive force, but as a dialogic partner in the pursuit of meaningful language learning.

This study supports the argument made by Luckin (2018) that AI should be viewed as 'Augmented Intelligence' rather than a replacement for human educators. The necessity of teacher mediation found here is consistent with Guan et al. (2020), who suggested that the effectiveness of AI in language learning is not innate to the software but is 'activated' by the teacher's pedagogical framing. This reinforces the idea that in value-heavy institutions like pesantren, the teacher serves as a crucial 'cultural mediator' between the technology and the learner

5. Conclusions

This study has illuminated the multifaceted perceptions of AI integration in pesantren English classrooms, identifying four pivotal dimensions: psychological (confidence building), ethical (cultural boundaries), infrastructural (literacy gaps), and pedagogical (teacher mediation). The findings demonstrate that AI tools are not merely technical additions but are active sites of negotiation where technology is interpreted through the lens of pesantren values.

The research concludes that successful AI integration does not necessitate a compromise of tradition. Instead, it requires a 'pluralistic approach' where technology is adapted to reinforce, rather than replace, institutional moral and cultural foundations. This shifts the focus from universal technological adoption to context-sensitive implementation. Consequently, future initiatives must prioritize culturally responsive tool design and professional development that empowers teachers as 'guardians of meaning' in the digital age.

By foregrounding marginalized voices in ELT discourse, this study challenges mainstream models of digital literacy. It calls for sustained collaboration between policymakers, developers, and religious leaders to ensure that technological innovation serves as a meaningful companion in cultivating ethical, confident, and contextually grounded language learners

6. Declaration of Conflicting Interest

The authors declare that there is no potential conflict of interest, whether financial, personal, or professional, with any individuals or organizations regarding the research, authorship, and publication of this article. This study was conducted independently, and the authors ensure that no external parties influenced the data collection, analysis, or the final results presented in this manuscript

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