

## Pesantren Students' Religious Beliefs and Attitudes toward Learning English in Indonesia

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### ABSTRACT

*Some students in Indonesian Pesantren (Islamic Boarding School) reported negative attitudes toward English as lingua Franca due to their environmental background, socio-cultural awareness, and identities. However, there are limited studies conducted in investigating their religious beliefs as the basis of pesantren students' attitudes toward learning English. Thus, this study aimed to investigate Indonesian pesantren students' attitudes toward learning English based on their religious beliefs and practices. The survey method was addressed to 250 respondents from three pesantren in Central Java. The researchers used a close-ended questionnaire adapted from the Attitudes/motivation Test Battery and 12 items focusing on the students' religious beliefs toward English. Besides, semi-structured interviews were conducted to get a deep understanding. This research employed one-way ANOVA and revealed a significant difference of the students' educational background in the pesantren on the mean of L2 attitudes,  $F = (14.40)$ ,  $\text{Sig.} = .000$ . The qualitative analysis revealed that ethnoreligious background shaped the positive attitudes of pesantren students toward English. Although most English speakers were non-believers, the students believed that learning English does not indicate the equal faith of non-believers and threat their religious identity. Furthermore, the participants claimed that learning English is important and not forbidden by religious teaching. They also thought that learning English can be considered as a kind of worship depending on the learner's intention, such as for communicating Islamic values to non-believers, future education, and improving careers.*

*Keywords: Attitudes; Ethnoreligious Background; Pesantren Students; Religious Beliefs*

### INTRODUCTION

Some factors affect language acquisition and learning, such as quality and quantity of input, age, attitude, aptitude, motivation, and socio-cultural identity (Bidin et al., 2009; Gömleksiz, 2010; Oroujlou & Vahedi, 2011; Paradewari & Mbato, 2018). Students should have positive attitudes since apathy will show pessimistic attitudes and try little or no effort to participate in the learning process. Kara (2009) said that views, beliefs, and learning attitudes affect their behaviours and performances. It is argued that some students who have strong views about the learning of

languages appear to raise positive attitudes on the learning of the target languages. Therefore, learners, teachers, and parents' attitudes toward the target language and its speakers are essential and determine how the learning process is ultimately successful (Fakeye, 2010; Getie, 2020). Although research regarding students' attitudes and socio-cultural identity has been extensively conducted, concerning religious beliefs as a reflection of socio-cultural identity is still considered not significant to discuss. This aspect is strangely denied to be a driving force of students' attitudes even though religion is the core identity for many people and languages closely connected with certain religions (Farid & Lamb, 2020). In reality, it is highly probable that the attitude of students studying English is dependent on the religious ideas that they have grasped as well as the application of these religious values in daily life. Religious teachings, particularly for Muslims, underpin their attitudes and actions.

Some researchers have explicitly revealed the interconnection between learning English and ethnoreligious backgrounds. Liyanage et al. (2010) suggested that pedagogical approaches should not be only designed within students' socio-cultural context but also designing language learning strategies considering their ethnoreligious background. Similarly, Foye (2014) pointed out that religion plays a vital role in many people's lives and cultures, so the teachers should not be ashamed to insert religious themes in ELT. English teachers employed in non-Western contexts can promote and form a vital reflection of religious values into ELT to ensure that their students do not neglect their religious identities (Mambu, 2017). Furthermore, Farid & Lamb (2020) found that the Muslim students relate their L2 motivation to spiritual vision as means for Islamic propagation and worldwide communication.

Some shreds of evidence reflect that religious identity is one of the factors affecting the attitudes toward English. Rassouli & Osam (2019) investigated two ways of perceiving English in Iran, government policies and Young Iranian society. They found that the regime thought English was a threat to Islamic identity so that authentic materials should be avoided in English learning sources. Although the young generation has been reported to have positive attitudes toward English, there is less discussion on the impact of religious beliefs and religious practices towards L2 attitudes in Iranian society. In the Malaysian context, Ahmad et al. (2014) pointed out that the students from religious schools background were noted to have low motivation and a negative attitude toward English due to nationalistic reasons and fewer relevancies to their educational background. Unfortunately, this research explored teachers' views without having checked with students' perceptions.

The previous studies have not explicitly concluded the connection and the impact of religious beliefs on students' attitudes toward learning English. Besides, limited research explored the perception of Pesantren students as Islamic education learners in Indonesian traditional institution toward learning English. Therefore, in this study, the researchers investigated the pesantren students' attitudes toward English based on their religious beliefs and educational backgrounds. In the context of religious beliefs, the researchers explored the students' theological perspectives of the origin of language based on their religious knowledge and the religious beliefs on English as lingua franca. Researchers have also explored their attitudes toward learning English and the interconnection between English and their educational backgrounds as Islamic education learners who are accustomed to use Arabic in their learning process. The researchers conducted this study in three different pesantren (Islamic Boarding School) in Central Java, Indonesia, that held various educational institutions. It is crucial to explore pesantren students' attitudes toward learning English in which they are knowledgeable with Islamic studies that they learned in Pesantren. The research questions are

1. What are the pesantren students' attitudes toward English language learning?
2. What are the pesantren students' attitudes on English as lingua franca based on their religious beliefs and educational backgrounds?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### THE L2 ATTITUDES

Attitude is a positive or negative response to anything or anyone seen in one's beliefs, feelings, or behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2000; Clore & Schnall, 2005). Students' L2 Attitudes depend on their beliefs in L2 learning and community (Alhamami, 2020; Ali et al., 2012; Bernhardt & Ellis, 1993; Gabillon, 2007). Social psychologists believe that attitudes affect actions as an individual's attitude towards a goal affects the overall behaviors of the individual's answers to that goal (Khalid, 2016). Attitudes are seen as closely related and focused on the views of individuals. They are generally called a positive or negative attitude to an object, circumstance, or behavior. Attitudes are crucial elements that influence the learner's intellectual capacities and attitudes towards language learning to achieve language achievement in the target language. Positive and negative attitudes towards the target language and its communities determine whether the language learning has been successful or not.

In a similar vein, if we are aware of someone's attitude towards the target language group, that is what he or she believes, then we can better predict how he or she will be acting towards them (Crookall, 1987; Gardner, 2006; Gardner et al., 1985). Further, a socio-educational L2 acquisition model was developed by Gardner (1985, 2005) with the Attitudes/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB). This AMTB test differentiates between two attitudes (integrativeness and attitudes to learning) and the third aspect of motivation. The model indicates that the integrativeness and attitudes towards the learning situation "are two related variables that encourage people to learn a second language, but are responsible for motivation in the second language." Therefore, Gardner's (2006) theory key issue is how effective it is to integrate aspects of the target language group in a student's attitude towards the target language community. Students generally accept that the language is part of a person's whole social being: it belongs to his personality and is used to convey it to others. Thus, second language learning requires academic or a formal aspect of rules or grammatical and a shift in self-image, new social and cultural behavior, and thus has an essential effect on the learner's social nature.

The successful learning of foreign languages, in particular English, is connected to the community's attitudes towards speakers (Csizer & Dörnyei, 2005; Dörnyei, 2003; Gardner et al., 1985). It means that the attitudes toward native speakers as the basis of the meaningful learning process may be influenced by socio-cultural backgrounds of the students. That is why language social psychology has become an important topic itself. Social psychology focuses on the analysis and explanation of social behaviour (cognitive and affective) that the linguistic field involves social relationships between society members (Semin, 1997). Thus, attitude influences someone's behaviours, internal mood, and learning. Language learning interacts with the environmental components of student growth. Negative and positive attitudes have a significant impact on language learning success (Getie, 2020).

In another perspective, language attitudes are constructed from evaluative reactions to language (Dragojevic, 2017). In line with this definition, language attitudes have been largely studied as evaluative beliefs. Dragojevic et al. (2020) divided evaluative beliefs about language

into beliefs about different language varieties and beliefs about speakers of different language varieties. On the other hand, understanding learners' beliefs about different language varieties and their speakers are essential because it allows instructors to better understand learners' approaches to language acquisition and learners' usage of learning techniques, allowing them to organise language instruction properly (Horwitz, 1988). What is going on inside learners' minds, including beliefs, appears to have a significant influence on the learning process (Abdi & Asadi, 2015). Therefore, some scholars maintain that some beliefs are advantageous to learners, while others believe that certain ideas might have a harmful impact on language acquisition (Horwitz, 1988; White, 1999).

#### RELIGIOUS BELIEFS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

In learning English as a second or foreign language, the students have diverse backgrounds in culture, education, ethnicity, linguistics, religion, and socio-economics. The importance of recognizing students' religious beliefs and practices in schools is just as paramount as learning the native languages of students. Ilosvay (2016) argued that the use of students' religious beliefs as their identity strengths might remove some of the misunderstandings in a classroom and help create a mutually agreeable atmosphere that may also be useful outside the school environment. Furthermore, Pasquale (2013) found in his research that most teachers see that religious belief plays an essential role in their views about various facets of education and learning. However, senior teachers recognize that their faiths and practices are inseparable; pre-service teachers' accounts suggest that they understand less integration.

Belief systems and socio-cultural values play an essential role in shaping attitudes toward language learning. Religious beliefs may differ the students' purposes of L2 learning. Farid & Lamb (2020) reported that learning English for pesantren students is projected as their religious self-guide to utilise English as a medium of Islamic propagation and proselytization. Similarly, Kristjánsson (2018) found that religious identity is expressed in the way students interpret or manifest God's love through faith-based material in language learning in church-sponsored adult ESL programs. In the Iranian context, more religious language students have less responsibility for studying those facets of the language culture that contrast strongly with those introduced by Islam, such as relationship, marriage, date, and ideology. In other words, since Islam is an all-embracing faith with moral precepts for all facets of society, Muslim language students show little, if any, tending to study the elements that their religion forbids of foreign language culture (Behtash et al., 2017).

In the Indonesian context, the implementation of the 2013 curriculum, also referred to as a character-based curriculum (Jazadi, 2015), emphasises religious education and puts English instruction into an elective study in primary schools (Hawanti, 2014). This curriculum is viewed as a failure of the previous curriculum, which lacks socio-cultural identity (Widodo, 2016). The moral growth of learners should also be included in all subjects, including mathematics and English. It is the schools' responsibility to develop students' moral values, including religiosity, patriotism, and nationalism. Thus, this commitment to moral values in all subjects' core curriculum is further referred to as ethnoreligious nationalism (Stockton, 2018).

The language of the original Christianity texts is not English, and thus it is not specifically religious. However, its historic appropriation as a "missionary language" offers an ideological burden that cannot be rejected in the Islamic sense as benevolent or as less evident than the overt religiosity of Arabic. Although historically, English use has been generally accepted among Muslim communities due to colonialism, westernization, and missionary activity (Al Rabai, 2014),

the dynamics of English use and ELT have changed (Mohd-Asraf, 2005). English has again not constituted a viable threat to the Islamic religion and beliefs (Farid & Lamb, 2020; Malallah, 2000).

## METHOD

### RESEARCH DESIGN

This research used both quantitative and qualitative approaches, which provided various perspectives of the research. The use of both qualitative and quantitative approaches was for methodological triangulation because the types of data conducted were both qualitative and quantitative data. The quantitative data were investigated by analysing the survey results on their attitudes toward English language learning based on their religious beliefs in three different pesantren to differ the patterns of attitudes among the variables. The qualitative data research was gathered from semi-structured interviews with the respondents to identify the partial explanation of these patterns and convey their perception regarding the origin of the language based on their Islamic beliefs, knowledge, attitudes toward English as lingua franca, and religious basis of English and its learning.

### RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

This research gathered data from 250 students of Islamic higher education in three pesantren (Islamic Boarding School) in Central Java, Indonesia. The higher education students in the three pesantren were recruited due to the maturity of their minds and the broader insight of their religious knowledge. The first pesantren was pesantren in Purworejo Regency that provided various educational institutions ranging from elementary to higher education (university level), both formal and non-formal. There were 80 participants from this pesantren who are students in Ma'had' Aly (Formal Islamic higher education). The second pesantren was in Kebumen Regency that only held non-formal Islamic institutions called madrasah diniyyah. There were 112 participants from this pesantren who are Madrasah Diniyah Ulya/Takhasus (Non-formal Islamic higher education). The third pesantren was the pesantren students of a state university in Purwokerto Regency that this pesantren was provided only for university students. Fifty-eight participants from this pesantren engaged in this research. All of the participants from the first and the second pesantren studied in both Islamic boarding schools for more than four years to have broader insights on Islamic teachings. On the other hand, 30 participants from the third pesantren studied in the pesantren for less than four years. It was because they came to the pesantren while enrolling in the university. Of 250 participants, 233 participants were eligible for analysis, and seventeen participants were excluded because of invalid responses, such as giving no response or zig-zag patterns.

TABLE 1. Participant description

Aspect	Frequency	Percent
Survey	(n) 233	
Gender		
Male	85	36%
Female	148	64%
Age		
15 - 17	13	6%
18 - 20	156	67%
21 - 23	43	18%
23 and over	21	9%
Learning Experiences in Pesantren		
Less than four years	30	13%
4 years - 5 years	34	15%
6 years - 7 years	115	49%
8 years - 10 years	45	19%
More than ten years	9	4%
Level of Education		
Formal Islamic Higher Education	74	32%
Non-formal Islamic Higher Education	110	47%
University level	49	21%

#### DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUES

The researchers collected the data through a survey and semi-structured interviews. The survey was delivered using Bahasa Indonesia and completed to reveal the students' attitudes toward English language learning. There were two parts of the survey. The first part was adapted from the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) developed by Gardner (1985, 2005) that has three significant sections, namely interest in English (1-5), positively worded items of attitudes toward learning English (6-10), and negatively worded items of attitudes toward learning English (11-15). The second part of the survey was also administered to reveal the students' perceptions of lingua franca regarding their religious beliefs. The items contained theological perspectives on the origin of language (16-18), religious beliefs on English as lingua franca (19-20), and religious beliefs on English language learning (21-27).

A semi-structured interview was done to support data validity gathered from the survey. Eleven students were chosen to reveal their attitudes toward English as lingua Franca based on their religious beliefs, theological perspectives on the origin of language based on their religious knowledge, and the interconnection of English with their educational background. Five of them were recruited because they have high score of survey result in each pesantren, six because they have the lowest score of the survey result. Four students from the 1<sup>st</sup> Pesantren, four students from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Pesantren, and three students from the 3<sup>rd</sup> pesantren were selected to be interviewed. The data from the interviews were collected through written interviews using WhatsApp chat as the media because of an impossible situation to meet face to face in the pandemic of Covid-19.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The data collected were analysed in both quantitative and qualitative manner. The quantitative data were measured by SPSS 25 to determine the initial reliability of all scales using Cronbach Alpha. Cronbach Alpha's result revealed 0.875, which meant that all of the items were reliable for further analysis and had strong consistency reliability.

TABLE 2. Result of Reliability Test

Reliability Statistics of Survey	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.875	27

For further quantitative analysis, the data collected were measured using descriptive statistics and one-way ANOVA to describe students' attitudes and to identify how attitudinal factors vary in the three different pesantren. Besides, ANOVA was employed to get a multivariate F value with the significance level at  $<.05$  because there were several dependent variables. In the analysis of the survey items, responses given were evaluated using participation levels to indicate their agreements on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree 4.01 – 5.00, Agree 3.01 – 4.00, Fairly Agree 2.01 – 3.00, Disagree 1.01 – 2.00, Strongly Disagree 0 – 1.00 for positive statements. For negative statements, the ranges were from Strongly Agree 0 – 1.00, Agree 1.01 – 2.00, Fairly Agree 2.01 – 3.00, Disagree 3.01 – 4.00, Strongly Disagree 4.01 – 5.00.

The qualitative phase of the data gathered through semi-structured interviews was analysed using thematic dimension analysis. The interviews used the first language to avoid misinterpretation, and then the high related data were highlighted to categorise respondents' perceptions.

## FINDINGS

### QUANTITATIVE PHASE

The researchers did the preliminary analysis by normality test. As measured using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov dan Shapiro-Wilk test, the result of the normality test showed that the data in three pesantren were distributed generally with the level of significance was more than 0.05 (Table 3). The homogeneity test was also performed in that the data were homogeneous with the level of significance at  $>0.05$  (see Table 3).

TABLE 3. Normality and Homogeneity test

Pesantren	Kolmogorov-Smirnov <sup>a</sup>			Shapiro-Wilk			Level of Significance of Homogeneity	
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.		Sig.
1 <sup>st</sup> Pesantren	.099	74	.068	.969	74	.063	Based on Mean	.641
2 <sup>nd</sup> Pesantren	.074	110	.177	.988	110	.458	Based on Median	.629
3 <sup>rd</sup> Pesantren	.100	49	.200*	.948	49	.032	Based on Median and with adjusted df	.629
							Based on trimmed mean	.635

As the survey results of the students' attitudes in three pesantren (Table 4), the "Interest in English" aspect got the highest score ( $M = 4.29$ ,  $SD = 0.53$ ). It indicated that the students had a high interest in using English to communicate with native speakers, learning other languages, and speaking English fluently. They also showed high attitudes toward English as a lingua franca and as a medium of communication in the international context ( $M = 4.20$ ,  $SD = 0.60$ ). However, theological perspectives on the origin of language obtained the lowest mean value ( $M = 3.92$ ,  $SD = 0.74$ ). Although it had the lowest mean value, it was still at the level of moderately high.

TABLE 4. Means and standard deviation of attitudes toward English and religious beliefs in the three pesantren

Aspects	N	Attitudes scale scores	
		Mean	SD
Interest in English	233	4.29	0.53
Positive items of attitudes toward learning English	233	4.13	0.68
Negative items of attitudes toward learning English	233	4.02	0.67
Theological perspectives on the origin of language	233	3.92	0.74
Religious beliefs on English as lingua franca	233	4.20	0.60
Religious beliefs on English language learning	233	4.07	0.55

The multivariate analysis between the three pesantren revealed a significant difference of the students' educational background in the pesantren on the mean of L2 attitudes,  $F = (14.40)$ ,  $Sig. = .000$ . From all of the attitude aspects, religious beliefs on English as lingua franca have no significant difference between the three pesantren ( $.088$ ). However, the other aspect revealed a significant difference in English attitudes based on their educational background in the pesantren. The students from the 3<sup>rd</sup> pesantren have the highest level of interest in English. On the other hand, the students from the 1<sup>st</sup> pesantren have the lowest mean score in learning English attitudes. Therefore, the students' mean scores in the three aspects of attitudes toward English learning were in the level of moderately high. It means that the students have positive attitudes toward English and its learning (Table 5).

Regarding the religious beliefs in Table 5, the students from the 2<sup>nd</sup> pesantren have the highest mean scores in the three aspects of religious beliefs. It shows that their religious beliefs and knowledge indicate more favourable views toward English. However, there is no significant difference in English as a lingua franca based on the students' religious beliefs ( $F = 2.45$ ,  $Sig. = .088$ ). It means that the students have similar views based on their religious beliefs and knowledge. They agree that Islam recommends learning foreign languages (including English) as a medium for communication worldwide as part of carrying out the concept of *ta'aruf* between humans (introducing each other).

TABLE 5. The comparison of attitudes scales in the three pesantren

Aspects	Pesantren	N	Mean	SD	F	Sig.
Interest in English	1 <sup>st</sup>	71	4.23	0.54	5.12	.007
	2 <sup>nd</sup>	109	4.22	0.55		
	3 <sup>rd</sup>	53	4.49	0.44		



Positive items of attitudes toward learning English	1 <sup>st</sup>	71	3.79	0.73	14.54	.000
	2 <sup>nd</sup>	109	4.31	0.56		
	3 <sup>rd</sup>	53	4.23	0.67		
Negative items of attitudes toward learning English	1 <sup>st</sup>	71	3.70	0.56	20.34	.000
	2 <sup>nd</sup>	109	4.29	0.56	.000	
	3 <sup>rd</sup>	53	3.90	0.80		
Theological perspectives on the origin of language	1 <sup>st</sup>	71	3.75	0.77	38.32	.000
	2 <sup>nd</sup>	109	4.29	0.56		
	3 <sup>rd</sup>	53	3.38	0.62		
Religious beliefs on English as lingua franca	1 <sup>st</sup>	71	4.12	0.66	2.45	.088
	2 <sup>nd</sup>	109	4.29	0.56		
	3 <sup>rd</sup>	53	4.11	0.57		
Religious beliefs on English language learning	1 <sup>st</sup>	71	3.84	0.45	18.58	.000
	2 <sup>nd</sup>	109	4.29	0.56		
	3 <sup>rd</sup>	53	3.94	0.46		

#### QUALITATIVE PHASE

The researchers did semi-structured interviews with eleven students based on the survey score achieved in each pesantren. Four students were recruited from the first pesantren; four students were from the second pesantren, and three students from the third pesantren.

The questions focused on their religious knowledge and beliefs in English. The interview was started by asking the theological perspectives on the origin of language. Seven students believed that the various languages worldwide, including English, were created by Allah, and four students pointed out that humans created their languages. An interesting answer was given by student five from the 1<sup>st</sup> pesantren who said:

"Both (created by Allah and human). Allah is the one who determines the diversity of languages, but on the other hand, Allah also gives inspiration to humans to produce utterances which then become the language according to Allah's stipulation."

To support his answer, he also referred to the qur'anic exegesis book (*Tafsir ar-Razy*) in interpreting the Qur'an ch. 2 verse 31-33. In response to the second question, students provided a variety of replies when they were asked if Adam, as the first human being, could speak a variety of languages. The majority of the respondents claimed that they did not know about this, but a respondent (student 4 from 2<sup>nd</sup> pesantren) gave her answer. She argued:

"The Prophet Adam firstly used Arabic because he was one of the inhabitants of heaven, but as far as I know, the prophet Adam also knew all languages as well as languages that exist today. So, I think the prophet Adam can (use English)."

Almost all of the respondents agreed that learning English as a foreign language is recommended in Islam. They stated that English is one of the knowledge that Muslims must master since it benefits them even if they have to study abroad. As a medium of worldwide communication, learning English has Islamic law consequences that are analogous to the purposes of learning knowledge. They claimed that the implications of Islamic law for learning English depend on the objective; if the goal is to improve the quality of religious knowledge, then it is included as a kind of worship.. However, four students (three of them from the 3<sup>rd</sup> pesantren and one of them from the 2<sup>nd</sup> pesantren) did not agree that learning English is not a kind of worship. Student 11 (from the 3<sup>rd</sup> pesantren) said:

"I do not think so. Because worships should be based on the clear religious laws."

In line with his answer, student 12 answered:

"Learning English is not including studying religion, so it cannot be said as a worship."

English is essential for their lives (like a career and seeking a job) but learning English is not a kind of worship.

The interviewees were asked an extreme question of whether using English was equal to being a non-believer in Allah (*kafir*) since most of the English speakers were non-believers. This question is essential to obtain information from the respondents whether they have conservative Islamic thoughts or not. They responded in moderate answers that they disagreed if someone is accused of being a non-believer in Allah just because they speak English. Student 1 said:

"In my opinion, whatever language used to socialize with the unbelievers does not matter... faith and Islam are still the main things."

Student 4 mentioned:

"Yeah, it cannot be like that ... as long as we use English not to justify their religion or to follow their worship. Our religion allows us to socialize with unbelievers."

In line with both responses, student ten also said:

"It is a good thing to use English since Islam can be introduced to unbelievers who mostly use English."

All of the respondents have the educational background of pesantren in which they have intensity in learning religion. On the other hand, English is on a separate line regarding their educational background. Thus, their views of the relationship between their educational background and English language learning were fundamental to be explored. They seemed open-minded in responding to this issue. The student from the 1<sup>st</sup> pesantren realized that learning religion is not enough to live in Indonesia as *santri* (pesantren students), but also studying other sciences is necessary to support their knowledge. Student 8 responded:

"Even if English is not explicitly related to my background of the study, it can be used to da'wah (proselytization) abroad. We are, of course, depending not only on Indonesian and Arabic but also on foreign languages. It is pointless to speak a lot, but the audience does not understand it because we do not use English."

## DISCUSSION

This research aimed to investigate students' attitudes towards English and its learning concerning their Islamic religious beliefs in the three different pesantren. The participants involved in this research were at a higher educational level. Although the survey results of the AMTB showed that the participants had reasonably high positive attitudes towards English, there were, however, gaps between the student's religious beliefs on English in the three pesantren. Students' beliefs on foreign language learning and community are the basis of their motivation and learning effort (Alhamami, 2020; Ali et al., 2012; Gabillon, 2007). Some researchers have previously investigated the interconnection between religious identity and foreign language learning (Farid & Lamb, 2020; Kristjánsson, 2018). However, we intended to investigate foreign language learning interconnected with students' Islamic knowledge on belief systems and ethnoreligious background.

The survey and interview results told us that students' religious learning experiences in the pesantren shaped their English beliefs. As Coleman (2019) found, the language learners' ethnoreligious background affected their attitudes and motivation to learn English. In a different context, Taiwo (2017) also found that secondary school students in the Northern Zone of Nigeria have negative attitudes toward English learning due to religious learning experiences and ethnic identity. As seen from the survey result, the students of the 2<sup>nd</sup> pesantren have dominant mean scores in all aspects compared to students of the 1<sup>st</sup> pesantren since most of the 2<sup>nd</sup> pesantren students have been studying in the pesantren for more than six years. Despite their high favourable views about learning English, they have a low average level of interest in English. It is possible that they spend more time studying religion than English since they have so little time to learn.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> pesantren students demonstrated that their religious knowledge was more advanced than the rest of them. They gave the answers with a straightforward argument based on their educational context. For example, in terms of theological perspectives of language, they replied by using Quranic exegesis (as shown by student 4) while students of the other pesantren do not know the language used by the prophet Adam as the first human being. This factor was probably affected by their religious learning experiences in interpreting foreign languages or non-religious languages. This question was essential because religious conception on the origin of language will give valuable information to complete the language learner's answer (Ceylan, 2017). In the classical explanation of Islam, normative practices and beliefs were essentially based on the synthesis of the Quranic and prophetic paradigms (Shah, 2011).

There was no substantial difference between the three pesantren in their religious beliefs in English as lingua franca. They claimed that the idea of *ta'aruf* (introducing each other) and *thalab al 'ilm* (looking for knowledge) in Islamic teachings included all kinds of knowledge, not limited to religious sciences. Therefore, learning English can be seen as a kind of worship depending on the aims of learning English. Furthermore, they realised that English would probably be valuable for finding a job and future career. Thus, the teacher should consider students' beliefs and feelings towards language learning to create a more authentic language teaching and learning process (Quinto, 2015). Farah (2020) also found that Islamic University students in Indonesia tend to learn English for their future careers and education. Compared to other pesantren students, the 3<sup>rd</sup> pesantren students have been studying religious teachings for less than four years. Their religious learning experiences were not as profound as the others. Csillagh (2015) argued that the students in higher education nowadays recognize the importance of a global status of English and are aware that they have to prepare to immerse themselves in the real world of work and responsibility.

The intolerance question posed to the participants was whether they had extreme thoughts towards non-believers concerning the language used or not. This question was based on some findings from the previous research that the students in Islamic educational institutions viewed English as *kafir* (non-believer) language (Ahmad et al., 2014; Farid & Lamb, 2020; Keshavarz & Amro, 2019; Mohd-Asraf, 2005). The students accepted that while most non-Muslims use English, it does not reflect the fact that Muslims do not need to learn and use English. English can be used to spread Islamic scriptural interpretation to non-believers through countries (as student 8 said). Their *pesantren* affiliation may influence the moderate responses they pointed out. The three *pesantren* were associated with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the most prominent Islamic organisation in Indonesia, in which tolerance is the cornerstone of the NU values. Farid & Lamb (2020) confirmed that the students from NU and Muhammadiyah educational institutions tend to be moderate in English learning.

After being cross-checked with the students' comments, they displayed optimistic attitudes and enthusiasm without resistance to the English culture. They claimed that, as Muslim learners, they had to be agents of the spread of Islam across the world in which English would have an important role to play. Student 4 stated that Islam enables them to socialize and develop a friendship with non-believers (represented by English speakers) to the extent that they are not influenced by non-believers' cultures or justify their religion. Unlike Farah (2020), she found that, while Islamic university students were attentive to English learning, they had invested negative attitudes towards accepting English culture. However, her research did not explore the students' religious beliefs in English. Furthermore, Nambiar et al. (2018) found that inserting students' cultural background in the learning process and materials was successful in improving positive attitudes and changing negative perceptions to learn English.

Survey data reveals that the *pesantren* students have a positive attitude towards English learning, even though they are more rigorous in studying religion. The use of English has been embraced by the *pesantren* community, which is, incidentally, a traditional Islamic educational institution in Indonesia. The dynamics of English and ELT have changed over the years (Mohd-Asraf, 2005) that English, which historically had not received a positive response from students at Islamic educational institutions due to westernisation, missionary activity, and non-believers language (Ahmad et al., 2014; Al Rabai, 2014), is no longer being viewed negatively as a challenge to their religion.

With the high acceptance by the community of traditional Islamic institutions in Indonesia, English educators and practitioners can regard the interconnection between English learning and religious beliefs. The learners' ethno-religious background determines the acceptance of English learning so that the selection of English materials, strategies, and media should be in line with this notion. As Liyanage, et al. (2010) concluded, to achieve those expectations concerning learners' ethno-religious background, the idea that language learning techniques are cultural must be thoroughly checked. In English language teaching, religious values can be inserted both in teaching materials and learning activities as suggested by Hasanah & Mufidatunnisa (2019), or in turn, English can be used as a medium of instruction in teaching Islamic sciences, especially at the Islamic university level as proposed by Syah (2015).

## CONCLUSION

For pesantren students, as the results from this study, English and its learning were highly accepted based on their religious beliefs and knowledge. Their ethnoreligious background and learning experiences shaped their beliefs toward English and its learning. Moreover, they had moderate Islamic views that learning English does not reflect a similar faith with non-believers. They claimed that learning English can be valuable for their future education and careers, besides it can be used to socialise and communicate Islamic values to the world community. However, the positive acceptance of English depends on their socio-cultural background and religious learning experiences. Thus, we suggest that interconnecting Islamic contents will generate many attitudes and improve learning activities' efficiency and effectiveness. Also, the pesantren community should notice this finding to improve pesantren alumni's quality in facing global challenges. Pesantren stakeholders can develop the pesantren curriculum to be more relevant to global trends while still preserving its cultural values.

This research is not without any limitations to note. The pesantren students participating in this research were three pesantren affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama as the moderate Islamic organisation in Indonesia. The survey was not measured using regression analysis, so it does not describe the relationship and influence between variables. The survey also used a 5-scale with the middle option, which may give a problematic interpretation. The authors suggest further research to include pesantren cultural values beside students' religious beliefs and investigate more variables or various respondents without limitation on pesantren students.

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