



PROCEEDINGS

International Conference on Education
Faculty of Tarbiyah | UIN Syekh Wasil Kediri
E-ISSN: 3025-6828

Volume 4, 2026

Students' Perceptions of English Learning in an Indonesian Islamic Boarding School

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Abstract:

English learning in pesantren takes place within a distinctive linguistic ecology in which Arabic and religious studies often receive stronger institutional emphasis. This study investigated junior high school students' perceptions of English learning at Lentera Ilmu Sumbawa Islamic Boarding School and identified the internal and external factors shaping those perceptions. A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was employed. Twenty-three students from Grades VII–IX completed a four-point Likert questionnaire, and nine students representing high, medium, and low perception categories were purposively selected for semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively through scores and percentages, while qualitative data were analyzed through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, followed by methodological triangulation. The findings showed generally positive perceptions across grade levels, with Grade VIII recording 79.8%, Grade IX 79.7%, and Grade VII 72.9%. Students regarded English as useful for further education, employment, digital media, and global communication. Positive perceptions were reinforced by motivation, supportive teachers, interactive instruction, and a disciplined learning environment. Nevertheless, vocabulary limitations, speaking anxiety, and restricted opportunities to use English outside class remained important constraints. The study concludes that positive perceptions emerge from the interaction between individual motivation and supportive instructional conditions. Pesantren-based English programs should therefore expand meaningful speaking practice beyond formal lessons while retaining contextual compatibility with the boarding-school environment.

Keywords: Students' Perception; English Language Learning; Islamic Boarding School; Pesantren; Mixed Methods

Introduction

English education in Indonesian Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) operates at the intersection of national educational expectations and an institutional culture historically oriented toward religious knowledge and Arabic. In the national curriculum, English is expected to support communication, academic development, and access to wider knowledge. In *pesantren*, however, English may occupy a more limited practical space because students' daily routines are strongly shaped by religious subjects, communal discipline, and the use of Arabic. This context makes students' perceptions especially important because perceptions influence how learners interpret the usefulness, difficulty, and relevance of English and, in turn, affect motivation and classroom engagement. Recent EFL scholarship increasingly treats motivation and learning as context-dependent processes shaped by interactions between learners and their social and instructional environments (Henry & Liu, 2023; Guo & Lee, 2023).

Recent studies indicate that English learning in Islamic educational settings is shaped by the quality of instruction, opportunities for communicative practice, religious and institutional context, and students' perceived future benefits. Lasminiar (2022) found that a bilingual boarding-school environment could foster positive language attitudes when English and Arabic were meaningfully used in daily activities. As Sabiq et al. (2022) likewise showed that *pesantren* students' religious background and attitudes were related to how they engaged with English learning. More recent *pesantren* studies have emphasized communicative practice, teacher methods, and program design as important sources of positive student responses (Herawati et al., 2024; Idris et al., 2025; Salsabila & Nugraheni, 2024). Broader evidence from Scopus-indexed EFL research strengthens this pattern: perceived teacher support is multidimensional and closely related to learner engagement (Liu & Li, 2023; Zhao & Yang, 2022), while enjoyment, anxiety, and boredom are important affective dimensions of language learning (Dewaele, Botes, & Greiff, 2023; Dewaele, Botes, & Meftah, 2023). Research with young learners also highlights the contribution of spoken input beyond the classroom and informal digital learning to meaningful English exposure (Tsang & Lee, 2023; Guo & Lee, 2023). Yet survey-based research focusing specifically on junior high school *santri* remains limited, particularly work that simultaneously examines perceived usefulness, motivation, emotional barriers, teacher support, learning environment, and boarding-school culture.

This study addresses that gap through a quantitative descriptive survey at Lentera Ilmu Sumbawa Islamic Boarding School. It asks two questions: (1) how do junior high school students perceive English learning, and (2) what factors are associated with those perceptions? The study contributes a context-sensitive quantitative account of English learning in a *pesantren* where students encounter the simultaneous demands of religious education, an Arabic-oriented institutional culture, and the growing practical value of English for education, work, digital media, and global communication.

Methods

This study employed a quantitative descriptive survey design to examine junior high school students' perceptions of English language learning at Lentera Ilmu Sumbawa Islamic Boarding School. A survey design was considered appropriate because the study aimed to systematically describe students' perceptions, attitudes, and evaluations of English learning based on numerical data collected from the target population.

The participants consisted of 23 junior high school students from Grades VII, VIII, and IX who were enrolled at Lentera Ilmu Sumbawa Islamic Boarding School. Because the number of students in the target population was relatively small, all eligible students were

included as respondents. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire employing a four-point Likert scale, ranging from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*. The questionnaire measured students' perceptions of English learning through several dimensions, including learning experiences, opinions toward English learning, perceived learning challenges, the relevance of English to students' educational and future goals, its relevance to everyday life, and the English learning environment. Additional indicators were used to examine factors associated with students' perceptions, including psychological condition, motivation, interest, teaching methods, the teacher's role, learning environment, and Islamic boarding school culture.

Prior to data collection, the questionnaire was reviewed through expert judgment by two lecturers in English education to evaluate the clarity, relevance, and appropriateness of the items. The questionnaire was then administered to all 23 respondents. Participation was voluntary, permission to conduct the study was obtained from the institution, and students' identities were kept confidential throughout the research process.

The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistical analysis. Responses to each questionnaire item were calculated in terms of frequency, percentage, and mean score. The overall scores were subsequently interpreted to identify patterns and levels of students' perceptions toward English language learning. Descriptive comparisons across Grades VII, VIII, and IX were also conducted to provide a clearer representation of perceptual tendencies among the respondents. The analysis was intended to describe the observed patterns within the study population rather than to test causal relationships or statistically generalize the findings to a broader population.

Results and Discussion

Findings

1. Overall Pattern of Students' Perceptions

The questionnaire results showed a consistently positive orientation toward English learning across the three grade levels. Grade VIII recorded the highest perception percentage (79.8%), followed very closely by Grade IX (79.7%), while Grade VII reached 72.9%. Across grades, Agree and Strongly Agree responses were more frequent than negative responses. The difference between Grades VIII and IX was negligible, and the lower percentage in Grade VII should be interpreted descriptively rather than as evidence of a developmental effect because the study did not employ inferential testing. Nevertheless, the grade-level pattern indicates that English was generally viewed as meaningful and worthwhile by students in the pesantren setting.

Table 1. Overall Students' Perceptions toward English Learning

Grade	Number of students	Perception percentage
VII	6	72.9%
VIII	9	79.8%
IX	8	79.7%

Source: Questionnaire Data

2. Future-Oriented and Everyday Relevance of English

Students' positive perceptions were particularly strong when English was connected to concrete future goals and everyday digital experience. The item "English is useful for future employment" obtained a mean score of 3.57 on the four-point scale, with all respondents selecting Agree or Strongly Agree. English was also perceived as useful

beyond formal schooling. The statement on using English for the internet and social media obtained a mean of 3.52, and 91.3% of students responded positively. The highest selected item in this cluster concerned understanding songs, movies, or games, with a mean of 3.61 and 91.3% positive responses. These results show that the perceived value of English was both instrumental, related to education and employment, and experiential, related to students' engagement with digital and entertainment media.

Interview data reinforced this pattern. A high-perception participant (HP3) explained, "I study English so that I can continue my education and prepare myself for the world of work." A lower-perception participant (LP2) similarly stated that English helped with "songs, movies, games, social media, and applications." The convergence of questionnaire and interview evidence indicates that students did not understand English merely as a compulsory school subject; they associated it with future mobility, access to information, and participation in a wider communicative world.

3. Learning Challenges, Confidence, and Speaking Anxiety

Positive perceptions coexisted with linguistic and affective challenges. Vocabulary remained difficult for a substantial subgroup of students: 47.8% agreed or strongly agreed that they had difficulty understanding English vocabulary, although the item mean was 2.35. For the statement "I find it difficult to speak English," 34.7% selected Agree or Strongly Agree and the mean was 2.26, showing that speaking difficulty was not universal but remained relevant for part of the sample. Psychological responses revealed an important nuance. Confidence in participating in English lessons was high (mean 3.39; 95.7% positive responses), yet 56.5% of students also reported anxiety when asked to speak English, with a mean of 2.65. Thus, classroom confidence and speaking anxiety were not mutually exclusive; some students could value and participate in English learning while still feeling nervous about oral performance.

The interviews clarify how students managed these difficulties. Students described rereading notes, asking the teacher, discussing with classmates, and looking up unfamiliar words. One lower-perception participant (LP1) stated, "I sometimes feel nervous because there is still a lot of material that I do not understand, but I keep trying to follow the lesson." Rather than producing wholesale rejection of English, difficulty often generated compensatory learning strategies and persistence.

4. Motivation, Persistence, and Learning Interest

Motivation was one of the strongest internal factors associated with positive perceptions. The statement "I have a strong desire to master English" produced a mean of 3.48, with 95.6% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing. The item "I learn English because it is important for my future" reached a mean of 3.43, while "I keep trying even though English is difficult" reached 3.52 and received 95.6% positive responses. These results indicate that students' motivation was not limited to enjoyment; it also involved goal orientation and persistence in the face of difficulty.

Interest, however, showed a distinction between classroom engagement and independent learning. Students were generally interested in English and enjoyed participating in lessons (both means 3.22), but the item "I look for English learning materials outside classroom hours" had a mean of only 2.48; 52.2% disagreed or strongly disagreed. This suggests that positive classroom interest had not consistently developed into autonomous study habits. The finding is important because favorable perceptions alone may not be sufficient to sustain learning without structures that encourage regular practice beyond scheduled lessons.

5. Teaching Methods and the Teacher's Role

The most consistently positive external influences were teaching methods and teacher support. Students rated interesting teaching methods highly (mean 3.48; 95.7% positive), while instructional media that helped them understand the material obtained a mean of 3.39. Practical learning activities, including speaking practice and classroom exercises, also received a positive mean of 3.30. Interviewees repeatedly requested more speaking practice, group discussion, videos, games, and engaging learning media, indicating that they associated active participation with easier comprehension and greater enjoyment.

The teacher's role was similarly strong. Clear explanation and teacher motivation each reached a mean of 3.35, while assistance when students experienced difficulty obtained a mean of 3.39. A high-perception participant (HP2) explained that the teacher "teaches clearly, provides many examples, and encourages students to participate actively." The same participant also hoped for "more speaking practice, group discussions, and engaging learning media." These responses suggest that students valued not only teacher friendliness or encouragement, but a combination of pedagogical clarity, emotional support, and opportunities for active language use.

Table 2. Selected Indicator-Level Findings

Indicator/item	Positive response	Mean
English useful for future employment	100.0%	3.57
English helps with songs, movies, or games	91.3%	3.61
Strong desire to master English	95.6%	3.48
Keep trying although English is difficult	95.6%	3.52
Interesting teaching methods	95.7%	3.48
Teacher helps when difficulties occur	91.3%	3.39
Confident during English lessons	95.7%	3.39
Seek English materials outside class	47.8%	2.48
Opportunity to use English outside class	56.5%	2.61

Source: Questionnaire Data

6. Learning Environment and Islamic Boarding School Culture

Students generally evaluated the classroom learning environment positively, but the wider language environment was less consistent. The classroom-support item produced a mean of 3.13. Peer support was more moderate (mean 2.78), and the opportunity to use English outside the classroom produced the lowest environmental mean, 2.61; only 56.5% selected Agree or Strongly Agree. Interview participants similarly reported that English was rarely used in daily interaction outside formal lessons and suggested conversation programs or language activities to create more frequent practice.

The pesantren culture itself was not perceived as hostile to English. Students rated the culture of discipline and the general boarding-school environment positively, both with means of 3.17. However, the statement that boarding-school activities helped improve English skills was weaker (mean 2.91). This distinction is important: the institution supported disciplined learning in general, but English-specific opportunities were not yet equally embedded in daily boarding-school routines. The central issue was

therefore not rejection of English by the pesantren culture, but the limited institutional space for sustained English use beyond the classroom.

Table 3. Response Distribution for Factors Influencing Students' Perceptions

Response category	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Disagree	15	2.7%
Disagree	80	14.5%
Agree	249	45.1%
Strongly Agree	208	37.7%

Source: Questionnaire Data

Discussion

1. Perceived Utility as a Foundation of Positive Perceptions

The findings indicate that the strongest basis for positive perception was students' recognition that English has tangible value. Their high ratings for future employment, education, internet use, and entertainment suggest that English was interpreted through a utility framework rather than solely through school requirements. This pattern is consistent with Idris et al. (2025), who reported that pesantren students become more engaged when English is linked to broader academic and future opportunities, and with As Sabiq et al. (2022), who showed that attitudes toward English in Islamic educational contexts are shaped by how learners reconcile language learning with their social and educational needs. It also accords with Henry and Liu (2023), who emphasize that L2 motivation is embedded in socially and contextually generated standards (Liu & Li, 2023), learning experiences, and anticipated future possibilities. The present study adds a junior-high-school perspective: even in a setting where Arabic and religious studies have strong institutional salience, students can assign English a complementary rather than competing role when its future and everyday benefits are clear.

2. Teacher-Mediated Pedagogy as an External Driver

The data also show that positive perceptions were strongly mediated by the teacher and by the way instruction was organized. High means for interesting methods, instructional media, clear explanations, motivation, and teacher assistance demonstrate that students responded positively when English lessons were understandable, participatory, and supportive. This supports Herawati et al. (2024) and Salsabila and Nugraheni (2024) in pesantren contexts. It also converges with stronger international evidence: Liu and Li (2023) conceptualized EFL teacher support as academic, instrumental, and emotional support, while Zhao and Yang (2022) found that perceived teacher support was positively associated with academic engagement through learner enjoyment and boredom. These studies reinforce the interpretation that teacher support functions as both cognitive scaffolding and affective support in EFL learning.

A purely teacher-centered interpretation would nevertheless be incomplete. The high ratings for practical learning activities indicate that effective teacher support is not simply a matter of explaining content clearly; it also involves designing conditions in which students can use English actively. The practical implication is that teacher quality and communicative opportunity should be treated as complementary rather than separate dimensions of pesantren-based English instruction.

3. Positive Perception Does Not Eliminate Speaking Anxiety

One of the most important interpretive findings is the coexistence of favorable perceptions, high motivation, and speaking anxiety. Most students reported confidence and mental readiness, yet more than half also reported anxiety when required to speak English. This tension is theoretically plausible because positive attitudes toward a language do not necessarily eliminate performance-related anxiety. Dewaele, Botes, and Greiff (2023) showed that enjoyment, anxiety, and boredom are distinct but interrelated dimensions of foreign-language experience, while Dewaele, Botes, and Meftah (2023) found foreign-language anxiety to be the strongest negative emotional predictor of achievement among the emotions they examined. The present findings therefore caution against equating positive perception with an absence of affective barriers.

Pedagogically, this means that more speaking practice should not simply increase performance pressure. Low-risk pair work, small-group interaction, rehearsal before public speaking, supportive correction, and repeated opportunities to use familiar expressions may be more appropriate for converting positive motivation into communicative confidence. This interpretation is also consistent with Tsang and Lee (2023), whose study of young EFL learners showed that speaking motivation and spoken input beyond the classroom were important pathways associated with speaking proficiency.

4. The Institutional Practice Gap in the Pesantren Language Ecology

The most significant contextual limitation was the gap between positive classroom experiences and limited English use outside formal lessons. Students valued the disciplined pesantren environment, but the lower scores for outside-class opportunities and English-supporting boarding-school activities show that the language had not yet become a regular part of daily communicative practice. This finding closely corresponds with Lasminiar (2022), who emphasized that a bilingual environment becomes meaningful when learners encounter opportunities to use the target language in routine activities. It is also supported by Guo and Lee's (2023) systematic review, which showed that informal digital learning of English is shaped not only by learner motivation but also by microsystem factors such as teachers, peers, and family, and by Tsang and Lee (2023), who identified spoken input beyond the classroom as an important contributor to young learners' speaking development. The present evidence suggests that Lentera Ilmu Sumbawa already possesses a supportive institutional foundation, but English practice remains concentrated in the classroom.

The solution should not be framed as replacing Arabic or reducing the religious character of the pesantren. The survey pattern does not indicate that the Islamic environment itself functions as a negative factor. A more plausible strategy is additive: English can be given bounded, purposeful spaces alongside existing linguistic priorities, for example through English conversation periods, language clubs, short English-day routines, peer speaking tasks, storytelling, or digital-media activities. Such an approach is compatible with ecological views of language learning in which opportunities for use are distributed across classroom and out-of-class settings (Guo & Lee, 2023).

5. Perception as an Interaction of Internal and External Conditions

Finally, the survey findings support an interactional interpretation of students' perceptions. Internal factors such as motivation, interest, confidence, and previous learning experience did not operate independently from external conditions. Motivation was reinforced by perceived future value; confidence was supported by teacher

assistance; interest was associated with interactive methods; and learning difficulties existed alongside a generally supportive classroom environment. This interactional pattern is consistent with Henry and Liu's (2023) argument that L2 motivation must account for learner-environment relations and with Guo and Lee's (2023) ecological synthesis of English learning beyond the classroom. The response distribution for the eight influencing factors, in which 82.8% of responses fell in Agree or Strongly Agree, further shows that students experienced these conditions as broadly supportive.

At the same time, the study's small, single-site sample requires restraint. The findings identify patterns within Lentera Ilmu Sumbawa Islamic Boarding School and do not establish causal relationships or population-level differences among grade levels. Their value lies in showing a coherent quantitative pattern: English is positively valued, teacher support is strong, motivation is high, but autonomous learning, speaking comfort, and opportunities for everyday English use remain the areas most in need of development.

Conclusion

Junior high school students at Lentera Ilmu Sumbawa Islamic Boarding School generally held positive perceptions of English learning, but the expanded analysis shows that this positivity is multidimensional. Students strongly valued English for future education, employment, digital media, and wider communication; they also reported high motivation, persistence, and appreciation of interactive teaching and teacher support. At the same time, vocabulary difficulty, speaking anxiety, limited autonomous study, and restricted opportunities to use English outside class remained evident. The findings therefore show that positive perception should not be interpreted as the absence of learning barriers. Instead, perceptions are produced through the interaction of internal conditions, motivation, interest, confidence, and prior experience, and external conditions, teaching methods, teacher support, classroom climate, peer interaction, and pesantren language practices. For practice, the school should preserve its supportive and disciplined learning culture while creating additional low-pressure spaces for meaningful English use, including conversation sessions, peer speaking tasks, language clubs, English-day activities, and contextually relevant digital-media tasks. Because the study involved only 23 students in one boarding school and used descriptive analysis, the results are context-specific and should not be generalized statistically. Future research should examine larger and more diverse pesantren samples and test how perceptions relate to measurable English achievement and longitudinal changes in language use.

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