



# Language Preference and Diglosic Practice Among Islamic Boarding School Students: A Case Study in Sociolinguistics

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Article Info	Abstract
<p>Received: 2026-04-03 Revised: 2026-04-16 Accepted: 2026-04-18</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Language preference; Diglosic practice; Arabic dominance; Islamic boarding school.</p> <p><b>DOI:</b> 10.24256/ideasv14i1.10050</p> <p><b>Corresponding Author:</b> Masnawati <a href="mailto:Watimasna978@gmail.com">Watimasna978@gmail.com</a> Universitas Muhammadiyah Kendari</p>	<p><i>This study investigates language preference and diglosic practices among students at an Islamic boarding school in Indonesia, where Arabic, English, and Indonesian coexist in daily communication. Language choice is shaped by sociocultural domains and institutional norms (Fishman, 1972; Holmes, 2013). Although Arabic and English are officially promoted, their use reflects unequal functional distribution consistent with classical diglossia (Ferguson, 1959). Using a qualitative case study design (Creswell &amp; Poth, 2018), data were collected through non-participant observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Data were analyzed using Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2014) interactive model. Findings indicate the dominance of Arabic in religious activities and peer interaction, while English is largely limited to classroom instruction. Arabic functions as a high-status variety linked to religious authority and institutional ideology (Ferguson, 1959), whereas English occupies a restricted pedagogical role shaped by language policy and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991; Spolsky, 2004). The study highlights how institutional ideology sustains diglosic hierarchies in Islamic boarding school contexts.</i></p>

## 1. Introduction

Language choice in multilingual educational settings is not neutral. It shaped by social, cultural, and ideological factors. Research in sociolinguistics shows that speakers select languages based on context, institutional expectations, and the meanings attached to each language (Fishman, 1972; Holmes 2013). These choices are closely related to identity and group membership. In most multilingual communities, languages do not function equally. Instead, they tend to form hierarchies that reflect power, values, and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991). Such hierarchies influence not only what languages are used, but also when, where, and by whom they are considered appropriate.

Islamic boarding schools (Pesantren) in Indonesia represent a unique multilingual environment in which Arabic, English, and Indonesian coexist with distinct functional roles. These institutions are not only centers of education but also sociolinguistic communities that shape student's linguistic practices and identities (Arif et al., 2024; Bernard Spolsky, 2004). Arabic occupies a central position as the language of Islamic texts and religious activities, giving it strong symbolic and ideological significance. English, in contrast, is associated with globalization, modern education, and access to international knowledge (David Cristal, 2003). Meanwhile, Indonesian functions as the national language and is primarily used for general communication and interpersonal interaction.

Many Islamic boarding schools formally promote the use of Arabic and English through institutional language policies and programs such as *bi'ah lughawiyah*. However, students' actual language practices in daily interaction often diverge from these formal expectations. In practice, Arabic frequently dominates everyday communication, largely due to its strong association with religious authority and institutional ideology. This phenomenon reflects what Charles Ferguson (1959) conceptualizes as *diglossia*, where languages or language varieties are functionally distributed according to social domains. As a result, language use within pesantren is not balanced but functionally differentiated, with certain languages carrying higher prestige and authority.

Previous studies on language use in Islamic boarding schools have primarily focused on formal aspects such as language policy, curriculum design, and classroom instruction (Fitria, 2023; Nur, 2021). While these studies offer valuable insights into institutional planning, they provide limited understanding of how students actually use language in everyday interactions. Moreover, only a few studies have examined how daily language practices reflect diglossic patterns, particularly in relation to institutional ideology and religious identity (Spolsky, 2004).

In other words, previous research focuses on formal language use, but very few studies explore how daily interaction reveals pattern of diglossia and language dominance among students. This gap is significant because it is in informal interaction that language choice becomes most natural, dynamic, and socially

meaningful. Therefore, examining student's daily language practices is essential for understanding how language ideology, identity, and institutional structures interact in shaping language preference in Islamic boarding school contexts.

## 2. Method

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore language preference and diglosic practices within a naturalistic educational setting, as this approach is particularly suitable for examining social phenomena embedded in specific institutional and cultural contexts (Yin, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research was conducted at an Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) in Indonesia where Arabic and English are formally promoted as institutional languages. The *pesantren* provides a multilingual environment in which Arabic, English, and Indonesian are used in both academic and non-academic contexts. A case study approach enabled an in-depth exploration of students' everyday linguistic practices and their relationship to institutional norms, rather than attempting to generalize findings across settings.

Participants in this study consisted of three female students representing each grade level of the Islamic junior high school (MTs/ Wustha') and Islamic senior high school (MA/ Ulya'), one English teacher with over five years of teaching experience, one Arabic teacher with over five years of teaching experience and one dormitory supervisors who have been staying for more than eight years. The participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that they were actively involved in the language environment of the *pesantren*. The student participants were drawn from different grade levels to capture variation in language use and proficiency.

. Data were collected through multiple qualitative methods to capture naturally occurring language use and participants' perspectives. These methods included non-participant observations of classroom and dormitory interactions, semi-structured interviews that elicited participants' experiences and attitudes toward language use, and document analysis of institutional regulations, language policies, and written guidelines. The use of multiple data sources allowed for a comprehensive understanding of language practices across different domains and enhanced the analytical depth of the study (Denzin, 2012).

Observation non-participant was conducted to examine students' natural language use in everyday interactions. Observations took place in various locations, including dormitories, classrooms, the canteen, and the surrounding area of the Islamic boarding school. Observations were conducted over four weeks, with a total of 12 sessions, each takes place at different times, depending on the situation and conditions. Field notes were used to record language choices, interaction patterns, and contextual factors influencing communication.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six students, two teachers, and one dormitory supervisor to gain deeper insights into their language preferences, attitudes, and experiences. The interviews focused on participants' perceptions of language use, institutional policies, and the role of Arabic and English in everyday interactions. Each interview lasted approximately five to ten minutes and was videotaped with the participants' consent.

Relevant institutional documents were analyzed to support the data obtained from observations and interviews. These documents included language policy guidelines, school regulations, and materials related to the implementation of the *bi'ah lughawiyah* program.

First, the data were transcribed and organized systematically. Second, coding was conducted to identify recurring themes related to language preference, functional distribution, and diglossic patterns. Third, the data were categorized into thematic groups, such as language use across domains, institutional influence, and sociocultural factors. Finally, interpretations were developed by linking the findings to relevant sociolinguistic theories.

To ensure the credibility and reliability of the findings, several strategies were employed. Data triangulation was achieved by combining observation, interviews, and document analysis. Member checking was conducted to confirm the accuracy of participants' responses. In addition, detailed descriptions of the research process were provided to enhance dependability and confirmability.

### **3. Result**

#### ***Language Preference in Daily Communication***

The findings reveal clear patterns in students' language use across various environments within the dormitory. The three main languages observed were: Arabic, English, and Indonesian. Of the three, Arabic emerged as the most dominant language, particularly in formal and informal contexts such as classrooms, religious activities, and peer interactions.

English appeared less frequently and was generally limited to specific academic contexts or when required by institutional policy. Indonesian was frequently used in formal classroom learning situations, also frequently when Arabic or English was difficult to pronounce due to forgetting, including casual conversations with friends in the dormitory, the canteen, and the surrounding environment of the Islamic boarding school.

These patterns indicate that language choice is context-dependent and shaped by institutional expectations and communicative purposes.

#### ***Functional Distribution of Languages a cross Communicative Domains***

This analysis also reveals the functional distribution of languages across various communication domains within an Islamic boarding school environment. Each language tends to have a specific role in a given setting. In classroom interactions, Arabic is predominantly used in subjects related to Islamic studies

and Arabic language instruction, while English is used only during English lessons, and Indonesian is used for general subjects and science. Students commonly use Arabic expressions during memorization activities and religious discussions.

In contrast, communication in the dormitories and other spaces around the boarding school is largely conducted in Arabic and English during designated times. However, students often switch to Arabic during English week and use Indonesian when engaging in casual conversation, sharing personal experiences, or discussing everyday issues.

Furthermore, the observed patterns indicate that although Arabic and English are institutionally promoted as official languages within the dormitories, their use remains largely confined to formal and academic contexts. Indonesian, on the other hand, continues to dominate everyday interpersonal communication among students, particularly in the learning of science subjects.

### ***Diglossic Practice in the Pesantren Environment***

The data show a functional distribution of language that reflects a diglossic pattern. Arabic functions as a "high" variety (H) associated with religious authority, academic prestige, and institutional norms. Arabic is often used in formal teaching, official communication, and religious discourse.

In contrast, English, although promoted as an important global language and used in formal educational activities, remains limited in everyday communication. English functions as a "low" (L) variety. Its use is more symbolic and instructional than communicatively dominant.

Indonesian serves as the primary language of interaction, particularly among peers in non-institutional contexts. Students rely on Indonesian for efficient communication in everyday life, particularly when discussing personal topics or coordinating routine activities.

### ***Institutional Language Policy and Its Influence on Language Use***

Institutional regulations play a central role in shaping students' language practices in the boarding school. Document analysis shows that students are formally required to use Arabic or English in daily interactions within the school environment. This policy is designed to support foreign language acquisition and reinforce students' academic and religious identities through consistent exposure.

Observational data indicate that this policy is actively enforced by teachers, dormitory supervisors, and senior students. Students are frequently reminded to use Arabic or English, particularly in public spaces such as classrooms, corridors, and dormitories. This reflects the institution's effort to maintain a structured language environment.

However, interview findings reveal that adherence to these rules is not always consistent. Students tend to follow the policy more strictly under supervision, but often shift to more familiar languages during informal interactions. As one participant noted: "When there's supervision, we try to speak Arabic or English, but with friends, we sometimes switch to Indonesian for convenience."

These findings indicate that while institutional policy strongly influences language use, its effectiveness depends on supervision, student motivation, and peer dynamics. A gap remains between official expectations and actual practices in everyday communication.

### ***Factors Influencing Student's Language Choice***

The findings identify several key factors influencing students' language choices in daily communication, based on observational and interview data.

First, language proficiency plays a central role. Students with higher proficiency in Arabic or English are more likely to use these languages, particularly in academic and semi-formal interactions, as greater competence increases confidence and participation.

Second, peer relationships shape language use in informal contexts. Students often adjust their language depending on their interlocutors. In interactions with close friends, especially without supervision, Indonesian is preferred for more fluent and spontaneous communication, although Arabic expressions are occasionally incorporated.

Third, instructor influence contributes to students' language practices. Many instructors predominantly use Arabic in daily communication, which reinforces its use among students, even in contexts where English is expected.

Fourth, institutional expectations encourage the use of Arabic and English as part of daily communication. These policies aim to create a multilingual environment that supports language learning and aligns with institutional goals.

Overall, these findings show that language choice is shaped by the interaction of proficiency, social relationships, instructor practices, institutional policies, and cultural-religious values.

## **4. Discussion**

This study examined language preference and the functional distribution of Arabic, English, and Indonesian within the daily communication practices of students in an Islamic boarding school environment. The findings reveal a clear pattern of multilingual interaction in which each language serves distinct communicative functions depending on the social context, institutional expectations, and interpersonal relationships among students. These patterns provide important insights into how language policies, sociocultural values, and communicative needs interact to shape linguistic behavior in educational institutions characterized by multilingualism.

One of the most significant findings of this study is the clear functional distribution of languages across different communicative domains. Arabic is predominantly used in religious and academic contexts, particularly during the study of Islamic texts, religious lectures, and Arabic language instruction. English, meanwhile, is primarily used during English language lessons and structured language practice programs. Indonesian emerges as the most frequently used

language in informal interactions among students, especially in dormitories, dining areas, and other communal spaces.

The observed of language distribution reflects the characteristics of diglossia, a sociolinguistic concept first introduced by Charles A. Ferguson. Diglossia refers to a situation in which two or more languages or language varieties coexist within a community, each serving different functional roles in particular social contexts. In the boarding school environment examined in this study, Arabic functions as a high-status language associated with religious authority, academic learning, and formal institutional communication. Indonesian functions as the primary language of everyday social interaction, allowing students to communicate spontaneously and efficiently with their peers. English occupies an intermediate position within this hierarchy. Although it is recognized as an important global language and is promoted within the educational system, its use remains largely restricted to formal instructional contexts and structured language activities.

This hierarchical distribution of languages also aligns with the concept of domain-based language use proposed by Joshua A. Fishman, who argued that language choice is strongly influenced by the social domain in which communication takes place. According to this perspective, different languages may be associated with specific social settings, such as education, religion, family interaction, or informal peer communication. In the context of the Islamic boarding school studied here, Arabic is closely tied to the domain of religious learning and Islamic scholarship, while English is associated with the domain of formal language education. Indonesian, on the other hand, dominates domains of informal interaction and peer communication. This distribution demonstrates how students navigate their multilingual repertoire in ways that align with both institutional expectations and practical communicative needs.

Another important aspect of the findings concerns the role of institutional language policy in shaping students' language practices. Document analysis revealed that the boarding school formally requires students to use Arabic or English within the school environment as part of its effort to create a language-rich learning atmosphere. The implementation of this policy is intended to strengthen students' competence in foreign languages while reinforcing the religious and academic identity of the institution. Observational data indicate that teachers, supervisors, and senior students actively monitor students' language use in public areas and often remind them to switch to Arabic or English when they are heard speaking Indonesian. These practices demonstrate that institutional authorities play an active role in promoting the use of designated languages within the educational environment.

However, the findings also reveal that the effectiveness of these language policies varies in practice. Interviews with students indicate that compliance with the language policy is often influenced by the presence or absence of supervision. Many students reported that they make greater efforts to speak Arabic or English

when teachers or supervisors are present. In contrast, when students interact privately with close friends or in situations where supervision is limited, they frequently revert to Indonesian. This pattern highlights the gap that can exist between official language policies and actual language practices within educational institutions. While policies may establish formal expectations, everyday communication is ultimately shaped by social relationships, comfort levels, and practical communicative needs.

The influence of language proficiency also emerged as an important factor affecting students' language choices. Students who possess stronger skills in Arabic or English tend to use these languages more confidently during interactions, particularly in academic or semi-formal contexts. Higher proficiency enables them to participate more actively in conversations and express ideas more effectively in these languages. Conversely, students with limited proficiency in Arabic or English often prefer to use Indonesian because it allows them to communicate more easily and avoid misunderstandings. This finding underscores the importance of linguistic competence in shaping language preference and suggests that the success of institutional language policies may depend partly on students' level of language mastery.

Peer relationships represent another key factor influencing language choice. The results of the study indicate that students often adjust their language use depending on the nature of their interpersonal relationships. When interacting with close friends, students frequently prefer Indonesian because it facilitates more relaxed and spontaneous communication. Informal peer interactions typically involve personal topics, humor, and emotional expression, which are often easier to convey in a familiar language. In some cases, Arabic expressions are incorporated into these conversations, particularly among students who are accustomed to practicing the language together. This pattern illustrates how language choice is closely connected to social dynamics and the desire to maintain comfortable and meaningful interpersonal communication.

Religious and cultural identity also contributes significantly to the symbolic value of Arabic within the boarding school community. Many students view Arabic not only as an academic subject but also as an essential language for understanding Islamic teachings and engaging with religious texts. Because many foundational Islamic sources are written in Arabic, the language carries a strong sense of spiritual and intellectual authority within the educational environment. This perception strengthens students' motivation to learn and use Arabic in contexts related to religious study. The symbolic importance of Arabic therefore reinforces its status as a prestigious language within the institutional hierarchy, even if its everyday use among students remains limited to certain domains.

Taken together, these findings illustrate that language choice within the Islamic boarding school environment is shaped by a complex interaction of multiple factors, including institutional policies, communicative domains, linguistic

competence, social relationships, and cultural values. Although Arabic and English are officially promoted as institutional languages, Indonesian also continues to play a role in daily communication among students. This situation reflects a common pattern in multilingual educational settings, where formal language policies coexist with practical communication strategies developed by students themselves.

While institutional policies encouraging the use of Arabic and English can create valuable opportunities for language practice, the findings suggest that such policies may be more effective when accompanied by supportive learning environments that increase students' confidence and proficiency in these languages. Programs that encourage interactive language practice, peer collaboration, and authentic communication activities may help bridge the gap between formal language instruction and everyday language use.

Despite the contributions of this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the research was conducted within a single Islamic boarding school, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other institutions with different linguistic environments or educational policies. Second, the study relied primarily on qualitative data obtained through observation and interviews. While this approach provides valuable insights into students' experiences and perceptions, future studies could incorporate quantitative methods to examine language use patterns more systematically across larger student populations.

## **5. Conclusion**

This study investigated language preference and diglosic practices among students at *Pondok Pesantren Attarbiyah Islamiyah Kolaka*, where Arabic, English, and Indonesian coexist as languages of communication in both formal and informal contexts. The findings reveal that students demonstrate clear patterns of language preference in their daily interactions. Arabic tends to dominate in religious and formal domains, reflecting the institutional emphasis on its use, while Indonesian frequently appears in informal peer communication due to its accessibility and shared familiarity among students. English, although officially promoted within the boarding school environment, is used less frequently and primarily appears in structured academic contexts.

However, several factors influence students' language choices in everyday communication. These include differences in language proficiency, institutional language policies, peer interaction patterns, and the situational context of communication. While the boarding school formally encourages the use of Arabic and English, the actual linguistic practices of students indicate a functional distribution of languages across domains. This pattern reflects a diglosic like situation in which languages are selected according to communicative needs and social contexts.

Based on these findings, the study recommends that Islamic boarding schools strengthen language policy implementation by providing more consistent language practice programs, communicative language environments, and supportive learning activities that encourage students to use Arabic and English more actively in daily interaction. In addition, teachers and language supervisors should facilitate structured opportunities for authentic communication, such as language clubs, peer discussion forums, and daily conversational practices, to improve students' confidence and proficiency.

One limitation of this study is that it was conducted within a single institutional setting, focusing only on students at *Pondok Pesantren Attarbiyah Islamiyah Kolaka*. As a result, the findings cannot be generalized to all Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia. Future research may involve multiple *pesantren* in different regions to provide a broader understanding of language preference and diglossic practices in Islamic boarding school contexts. Such studies may also explore the role of institutional language policy, sociocultural factors, and language ideology in shaping students' language behavior.

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