



Identifying English Learning Needs in an Indonesian Islamic Boarding School: A Needs Analysis Study

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Article Info	Abstract
Received: 2026-02-05 Revised: 2026-05-13 Accepted: 2026-09-23 Keywords: Need Analysis; Pesantren; Insider; Outsider DOI: 10.24256/ideas.v14i2.9599 Corresponding Author: Katrin Pepita katrinpepita@upi.edu Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia	<i>Pesantren or Islamic boarding school students live in the school around the clock, which opens wide opportunities for English acquisition, yet it is not only a true case, leaving Indonesia as a country with low proficiency in the language. This article aims to explore what students in a pesantren need in terms of an English program. Under the insider and outsider perspectives, the study used a mixed-method approach, taking 35 former year students and 77 recent students as the samples. The survey was used to examine the programs offered by the Pesantren, while a focus group discussion with a group of alumni and interviews with 2 student participants, 3 teachers, and 1 principal, as well as document analysis, were used for triangulation purposes. The findings reveal students' perceptions of the skills and programs required for attempts to realize which are suitable for the context.</i>

1. Introduction

Pesantren or Islamic boarding school has become an important component in Indonesia's educational system. With the total number of 28,961 in 2015 (Kemenag, 2015 as cited in Umar, 2022) being increased to 42,433 in 2025 (Kemenag, 2025), the system also opens an opportunity for the success of the improvement in Indonesian proficiency in English, where the country still belongs to the low English proficiency category (EF, 2025).

In recent decades, many *pesantrens* have been evolving from traditional religious institutions into modern educational settings and have incorporated English programs to prepare students for higher education and global communication. However, English learning across these institutions remains highly varied. Some *pesantrens* have implemented immersion programs that require English as the medium of daily communication, while others still rely on limited classroom instruction without clear integration into students' daily routines (Irawan & Haerazi, 2020; Chadafi, 2024). Despite the residential nature of *pesantren*, where students live and study together around the clock, English has not yet become a functional language of communication for most students.

In such non-immersion contexts, identifying students' authentic English learning needs is essential for designing effective and context-responsive curricula. Needs analysis (NA) provides a systematic framework for examining learners' goals, current abilities, and contextual constraints to ensure alignment between instruction and real communicative demands (Serafini et al., 2015). It is widely recognized as a fundamental step in curriculum development, guiding the formulation of objectives, materials, methodology, and evaluation (Tyler, 1949; Flowerdew, 2012; Macalister & Nation, 2019).

Previous needs analysis studies in *pesantren* contexts have employed various approaches, primarily relying on questionnaires or on a combination of questionnaires and interviews focusing on students' perspectives (Wibowo et al., 2023; Habibah, 2020; Karman et al., 2024; Latif, 2019). While these studies provide valuable insights, recent methodological developments emphasize the importance of integrating insider and outsider perspectives, adopting inductive-to-deductive sequencing, and employing data triangulation to capture learners' needs more comprehensively (Serafini et al., 2015). However, limited studies have applied such a comprehensive approach in non-immersion *pesantren* contexts.

To address this gap, the present study employs a mixed-methods needs analysis integrating insider and outsider perspectives. Insider perspectives refer to individuals directly involved in the institution, such as students and teachers, while outsider perspectives include those who can provide reflective insights based on prior experience, such as alumni. Specifically, this study aims to answer the following research question: *What types of English programs do pesantren students and stakeholders consider most relevant and necessary for their school?*

2. Method

Research design

This study employed a mixed-methods design to conduct a comprehensive needs analysis of English learning in a *pesantren* context. The study was designed to follow that of Serafini et al. (2015) and Smith et al. (2022, 2025). It consists of three stages: (1) qualitative exploration, (2) quantitative data collection, and (3) data integration. where each of the stages has some substages as depicted in Figure 1.

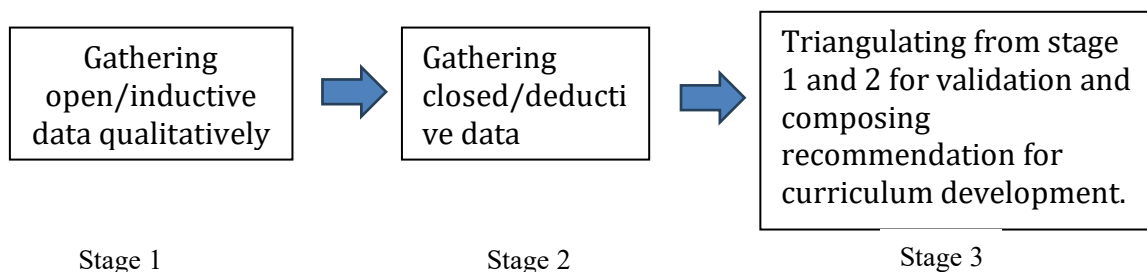


Figure 1. Design of the Needs Analysis

In Stage 1, qualitative data were collected to explore participants' perspectives and generate themes. In Stage 2, these themes were used to develop a structured questionnaire. In Stage 3, data from multiple sources were triangulated to identify shared patterns and answer the research question.

Participant and Sample

The study was conducted in a private Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) at the junior high school level in West Java, Indonesia. The institution emphasizes Qur'anic memorization (*tahfidz*) while also incorporating general subjects, including English. Although English is stated as part of the school's mission, it is not yet used as a daily communication language.

Participants and samples were selected to represent both insider and outsider perspectives. In this study, insider perspectives refer to individuals who are directly involved in the current learning context, including students, teachers, and the school principal. Outsider perspectives are represented by alumni, who are no longer part of the current educational setting and therefore provide retrospective insights into their past learning experiences.

In the qualitative stage, two students, four alumni, three teachers, and one principal were involved. In the quantitative stage, 77 students and 32 alumni participated, with the sample size determined using Yamane's formula (Oluigbo et al, 2024). The participant distribution is as can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Distribution

Stage 1	Stage 2
Student (n=2)	Student (n=77)
Alumni (n=4)	Alumni (n=32)
Teacher(n=3)	
Head master (n=1)	

Instruments

Multiple instruments were used to ensure data triangulation. In Stage 1, qualitative data were collected through observation, focus group discussions (FGDs), interviews, and document analysis. These instruments were used to explore participants' experiences and identify key themes related to English learning needs.

In Stage 2, a structured questionnaire was developed based on the qualitative findings. The questionnaire included items on preferred English programs, skill priorities, and reward–punishment systems, using Likert-scale, checklist, and open-ended formats.

The questionnaire was tested for validity using Pearson product-moment correlation and for reliability using Cronbach's alpha. All retained items met acceptable validity and reliability criteria.

Table 2. Instruments Used

Stage 1	Stage 2
Field note	
FGD and interview	closed questionnaire derived from stage 1
Document analysis	

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted in two phases: qualitative and quantitative data, where qualitative data collection preceded quantitative data collection.

Qualitative Data Collection

1. Observation

The study began with non-participant observation to capture the natural use of English within the school environment. The observations were conducted over one week and recorded using field notes.

The primary observation site was the teachers' office, as it provided a setting where English use occurred naturally in daily interactions without being constrained by formal academic activities. This setting also allowed the researcher to observe both teacher–student and student–student interactions. Additional observations were conducted in other areas of the school to obtain a broader perspective.

The field notes documented detailed descriptions of language use, including whether students used English or other languages, as well as the purposes of such use. Each entry was systematically recorded along with the date of observation.

2. Focus Group Discussion and Interviews

Following the observation phase, a focus group discussion (FGD) and semi-structured interviews were conducted.

The FGD was carried out with a group of alumni to explore their past experiences and perceptions regarding the use of English during their time in the *pesantren*. The discussion was conducted once and was intended to elicit shared memories and collective reflections that might not emerge in individual interviews.

In-depth interviews were conducted with key stakeholders to gain deeper insights. Due to the frequent changes in school personnel, including leadership positions, interviews were considered more appropriate than FGD for teachers and staff.

The participants included the school principal, one teacher with less than two years of teaching experience (T1), one teacher who had recently been assigned as a *musyrif* (dormitory supervisor) (T2), one senior teacher with more than 10 years of experience in the *pesantren* (T3), and two Grade 9 students selected purposively based on their English achievement levels (S1: high achiever; S2: low achiever).

The interviews were guided by the research question: *What types of English programs do pesantren students and stakeholders consider most relevant and necessary?* All participants were informed that the purpose of the interviews was to explore their perspectives on English program needs.

3. Document Analysis

Document analysis was conducted to identify existing programs and institutional efforts related to English use. The documents analyzed included the school's vision and mission statements, official school programs, and student organization programs.

Quantitative Data Collection

Questionnaire

The second stage of data collection involved the distribution of a structured questionnaire to students and alumni. The questionnaire was developed based on the findings from the first stage of the study. The instrument consisted of three main parts:

1. English language programs perceived as useful for students in the *pesantren*,
2. The punishment–reward system, and
3. English language skills to be prioritized.

The questionnaire included a combination of item formats. Frequency-related items were measured using a four-point Likert scale, while items addressing perceptions and attitudes were measured using a five-point Likert scale, following established practices. In addition, checkbox items were used to assess preferred programs identified from earlier qualitative findings, and open-ended questions were included to allow participants to express additional perspectives.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data obtained from observations, interviews, and focus group discussions were analyzed using thematic analysis following the framework of Braun and Clarke (2012), which involves data transcription, initial coding, theme development, theme review, and reporting.

The results of this analysis were used to inform the development of the questionnaire for the second stage.

Furthermore, data from multiple sources—including observations, interviews, focus group discussions, and questionnaires—were systematically compared and integrated. This triangulation process was conducted to enhance the credibility and reliability of the findings.

3. Result

Suggested Program

The results on the list of programs suggested by the alumni and enrolled students were obtained from the results of checklists. The enrolled students and the alumni agreed on four programs, yet differed in three others. The checklist results show that alumni and enrolled students both valued watching, vocabulary practice, and vocabulary tests as the most useful English programs, though their priority order differed. Alumni ranked role play/dialogue practice equally high with watching, while students placed vocabulary practice second. Alumni categorized translating, games, reading, storytelling/*muhadoroh*, and writing as middle-priority programs, with none falling into the low category. In contrast, students considered writing and storytelling/*muhadoroh* as low-priority. Overall, both groups agreed on the importance of watching, vocabulary practice, and vocabulary tests, but diverged in their secondary preferences.

Table 3. English Language Programs Perceived to be Useful for Students

Program	Alumni (Mean)	Students (Mean)	Category Agreement
Watching	0.75	0.73	High
Vocabulary Practice	0.66	0.70	High
Vocabulary Test	0.69	0.68	High
Game/competition	0.50	0.49	Middle
Reading	0.44	0.63	Middle
Role Play/Dialogue	0.75	0.58	Middle
Translating	0.53	0.61	Middle
Storytelling/ <i>Muhadoroh</i>	0.41	0.22	Different
Writing	0.34	0.25	Different

Overall, both students and alumni consistently prioritized watching and vocabulary-related activities as the most useful programs, while differences emerged in secondary preferences, particularly in writing and storytelling, which were rated lower by students.

Skill Priorities

The prioritization of English skills was measured using a five-point Likert scale. Overall, both alumni and enrolled students showed strong agreement on the importance of most English skills, although alumni consistently reported higher mean scores across all items, as can be seen in the following table.

Table 4. Mean for Skills to Focus on in the Future Program

Skill	Alumni (Mean)	Enrolled Student (Mean)	Notable Difference
Listening	4.6875	4.039473684	Slightly lower
Speaking	4.625	4.184210526	Slightly lower
Reading	4.625	4.144736842	Slightly lower
Vocabulary	4.625	4.144736842	Slightly lower
Pronunciation	4.5625	4.144736842	Slightly lower
Writing	4.5625	4.026315789	Slightly lower
ESP	4.34375	3.460526316	Major difference
Grammar	4.1875	3.986842105	Slightly lower

The results indicate that listening, speaking, reading, and vocabulary were rated highest by alumni, followed closely by pronunciation and writing. Enrolled students showed a similar pattern, although with slightly lower mean scores.

ESP showed the most notable difference between the two groups, with alumni rating it as moderately important while students rated it considerably lower. Differences were also observed in the least prioritized skills: grammar was the lowest-ranked skill among alumni, whereas ESP was the least emphasized by students.

Distribution data further revealed that, although most students rated the skills as important or very important, some expressed lower agreement, particularly for grammar and ESP.

Overall, both groups consistently prioritized listening, speaking, reading, and vocabulary as key skills, with generally similar patterns but lower overall ratings from students and a notable divergence in the perceived importance of ESP.

Reward vs Punishment

The survey revealed that both alumni and enrolled students generally disagreed with the use of punishment in English language programs, while showing stronger support for reward systems. Alumni responses indicated strong disagreement with punishment (41%) but strong agreement with rewards (93%). Similarly, students tended to disagree with punishment (47%) and agree with rewards (71%), though their support for rewards was slightly lower than that of alumni. The following are the results from the questionnaire.

Table 5. Perception of Punishment and Reward System in the English Language Program

System	Alumni	Student	Interpretation
Punishment	41%	47%	Both tend to disagree
Rewards	93%	71%	Both agree, alumni stronger

Overall, both students and alumni showed a clear preference for reward-based systems over punishment, with stronger support for rewards consistently observed across both groups.

4. Discussion

Future Program

The findings indicate that students in the *pesantren* context require structured English programs that can utilize their available time outside formal learning. Both alumni and current students reported having sufficient time that could be used for English learning, suggesting that time constraint is not the primary barrier. Instead, the challenge lies in the absence of structured and engaging programs that can facilitate consistent language use. The following section may further discuss the programs revealed from the study.

Speaking - Pronunciation-Supporting Program

The findings reveal that programs related to speaking skills are considered to be very important for enrolled students and alumni. Related to the real program to establish, it is confirmed from the alumni that role play or practicing dialogue (mean=0.75) would be fit to this develop this skill. Similarly, though the questionnaire shows that role play/dialogue was categorized to be in the medium level of agreement (mean=0.58), S2 stated that he learned a lesson from his friend that the first thing he could do to study English is by reading a daily conversation book, and the practice he perceived as useful and easy to follow is by practicing dialogue.

The extract

Kaya infirodi ... Kita itu dikasih kata-kata gitu. Bukan kata-kata sih kaya udah satu kalimat kaya buat nanya kaya masmuka awal perkenalan kaya kaya ngetanyain apa sehat atau ngga yang kaya gitu gitu ... (percakapan) tapi pelan-pelan.... [Like inforodi ... We get some words. Not words like a sentence to ask like masmuka at the beginning of the introduction, like to ask the condition or alike ... (dialogue) yet slowly]. (S2)

Further, the findings also raised a notion that the skill cannot be separated from pronunciation and vocabulary. By reading the dialogue aloud, the student practiced how to pronounce the words within, and by knowing the translation of each word, he could memorize some vocabulary. It is supported by the interview with T2 that students can gain vocabulary from the dialogue practice.

In the case of using English in daily use, it is also argued that the vocabulary should be mastered, while grammar should also be connected to the vocabulary learned. These findings align with previous studies highlighting the integrated nature of language skills, where productive skills such as speaking rely heavily on receptive input and lexical knowledge (Mart, 2012). Students' preference for vocabulary-focused activities suggests that lexical knowledge is seen as a key enabler of fluency, especially in contexts where exposure to English is limited. This reflects the interdependent relationship between vocabulary and communicative performance, where insufficient lexical resources may hinder students' ability to express ideas despite having basic grammatical knowledge.

In the case of the grammar, it also supports the notion that the grammar needed by *pesantren* students is the one that can support their speaking (Karman et al., 2024).

The extract

Yang paling harus diperkuat dari vocabulary nya sih kosa kata terutama terus kaya verb 1 verb 2 verb 3 nya itu memang harus dikuasai secara grammar mungkin bisa nyusul ya yang penting kita punya kaya kata dulu lah. InsyaAllah dengan kosakata kaya dengan kosakata menyusun kalimat pun mudah meskipun grammar nya masih salah salah... [What should be strengthen is particularly vocabulary like verb 1, verb 2 verb 3 which should be mastered where grammar can be taught later that the important thing is we have banks of vocabularies first. InsyaAllah it can make us easy to make a sentence though the grammar is still not perfect].

However, it is also revealed that to realize the dialogue into a real daily speaking practice requires a system. He suggested that the system should ensure the vocabulary that has been taught is used in daily conversation, where the students are not allowed to use Indonesian for the vocabulary. Related to this, T3 suggested that the system may also require human resources as the agent controlling it to happen.

The extract

Dulu sempet di sini itu ada anak anak yang tertarik dengan Bahasa terus memprogramkan program hari berbahasa meskipun Bahasa Inggris hanya satu pekan sekali... tapi itu berjalan ... dulu kebetulan kakak asuh sih jadi dulu sempet di sini itu ... sebelum tidur itu anak-anak mengantri harus menyetorkan ke kakak asuh [It had ever happened here some students interested in language made a language day though English day was scheduled for once a week... but it was successfully conducted ... it was coincidentally the dormitory parents ... before going to bed, the students cued to have a vocabulary test with the dormitory parents....] (S3)

The findings, however, suggested a role-based drilling program. It is suggested that role-based drilling can support students in having accurate pronunciation (Abrar & Widiati, 2024). These also align with Karman et al. (2024), with a similar character of students who were basically trained to memorize the Qur'an,

Besides practicing dialogue, the common practice in Islamic boarding schools is practicing speech or *muhadoroh*. However, though *muhadoroh* has been commonly practiced, both the alumni (mean=0.41) and students (mean=0.22) considered that storytelling/*muhadoroh* is not as important as practicing dialogue. It is different from the study of Karman et al. (2024), in which the participants were the students or *santri* of an Islamic boarding school of junior and senior high school level, which shows that practice for speech is needed by 60% of the student respondents. The findings support the notion that storytelling may cause anxiety (Harmer, 2007) since it requires responsibility and independence (Sharipova, 2024). However, when learners are getting used to doing it, they may develop their self-efficacy in speaking (Sharipova, 2024).

However, considering that there was a dispute between insiders and outsiders that the alumni categorized storytelling/*muhadoroh* in the moderate level while the students categorized it in the low level, may indicate that the program may have the potential to be a required program in the future.

Reading-Vocabulary Supporting Program

The findings on vocabulary that it cannot be separated from speaking-pronunciation program suggested that vocabulary should be put in an integrated program. It is also revealed from reading focus category. Proposed under this category are reading short articles and comics. It is further suggested that T1 believed that students need to understand vocabularies they read by translating the words within.

The extract

Mungkin ya anak-anak tuh harusnya mulai dari paragraf pendek aja dulu dan terjemahin [In my opinion, maybe students should start from a short paragraph and translate it]. (T1)

It supports the notion that vocabularies can also be influenced by reading (Mart, 2012) while reading can also be influenced by vocabularies, which in this case was suggested to be carried out through translation. However, the condition that the students may require translation may result from the students' English level (Badda Badda, 2024).

The findings also reveal that support for vocabulary mastery was suggested to involve vocabulary exercises (agreed by 66% of the alumni and 70% of the students) and tests (agreed by 69% of the alumni and 68% of the students). Slightly lower than the exercise and test, game was moderately agreed upon by the alumni (50%) and students (49%). It supports the statement that games may be less preferable for *pesantren* students, as in the study of Karman et al. (2024) there was only 15% of agreement on the use of games.

Listening-Supporting Program

Besides reading, listening is also considered an essential receptive skill. Further, the alumni put it as the most essential skill to master. They also believed that the way to acquire the skill is by watching. It is in line with the notion of extensive listening (Chang, 2024). Related to this, it was revealed that extensive listening through videos like movies and TV programs can improve listening skills (Metruk, 2019). This is also acknowledged by the higher achiever student participant.

The extract

... kalo saya pribadi sering belajar Inggris itu dari nonton film film dari luar negeri jadi belajar belajar sendiri [I personally often learned English from watching foreign movies that I learned by myself]. (S1)

Further, almost three-quarters of the participants considered watching to be beneficial for them. These findings align with those of Karim et al. (2024) that 41.2% of their respondents strongly agreed and 58.8% of them believed that watching English movies could improve their listening skills. This preference indicates that the participants value contextualized and engaging input as a means of improving their language ability. In a non-immersion *pesantren* environment, where natural exposure to English is minimal, such input becomes a crucial substitute for real-life interaction. Watching English content not only provides linguistic input but also exposes learners to pronunciation, intonation, and cultural aspects of language use. Though the students had not perceived this importance, it should be considered that English programs in non-immersion contexts should not treat language skills as isolated components but rather as interconnected elements within communicative practice that further programs should consider including the involvement of watching as well as the titles to be put within.

The findings that there was a difference in priority that alumni prioritize this as the most essential skill to master, while the students chose speaking, yet they chose watching as essential, may support that the insider and outsider perspectives in need analysis are important. The dispute between insiders and outsiders may suggest that there is something to focus.

Writing-Supporting Program

Similar to speaking, there was also a dispute under this topic of discussion, where the students felt that they agreed that writing is needed, yet only 25% of the students agreed to have a writing program. The importance is reflected in an interview with one of the students, in which he also showed his journal written in English.

The extract

Kalo saya sih suka nulis jurnal gitu [I like writing a journal].

Studies show that writing is difficult since besides acquisition, it also involves learning (Kroll, 1979). The findings, however, also suggest that the productive skill priority of the major students is not in writing, but in speaking. It is in line with the vision and mission of the institution. It highlights the importance of an institution, in that the way an institution sees an element as its priority may affect the way how academicians within view the element.

In the case where the dispute between insiders and outsiders happened within this issue, where the alumni categorized it as moderately needed, while there was a low agreement among the students may reflect that this skill may be needed in the future. It should be noted that apart from their needs on being able to speak in English, Indonesia is currently applying the Genre-Based Approach (GBA) that primarily focuses on reaching the ability to write texts.

Punishment and Reward

Another important finding relates to the role of motivation in supporting language learning. Both students and alumni showed a strong preference for reward-based systems over punishment. This suggests that positive reinforcement may be more effective in encouraging participation and sustaining engagement. The qualitative data support this finding, as reflected in students' responses to reward-based practices in other learning contexts, which fostered a sense of competition and intrinsic motivation. The rewarding system was preferable for either alumni (94%) or students (71%) compared to punishment, where less than 50% of the alumni and students agreed with the punishment system. It is in line with T3 that motivation could be built by the rewards as reflected from the recording system for the number of Qur'an pages recited during Ramadhan.

The extract

... tilawah yang dicatat di depan lumayan berpengaruh untuk anak-anak ... ada kejar-kejaran jadi ambisi dalam diri anak-anak itu [the records on the number of pages successfully recited was quite influential for the students ... there was a competition becoming an ambition within them]

This also suggests that effective English programs in *pesantren* should not only focus on content but also consider behavioral and motivational aspects that align with the existing educational environment. In the case of this motivational aspect, T2 still believed that punishment would be fit to be taken as a system. However, since the students as the insiders and alumni as the outsiders have a shared vision on seeing this system, it should then be noted that the system that may be fit to the institution is the reward system instead of the punishment one.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights the authentic English learning needs of *pesantren* students in a non-immersion context under the insider and outsider framework. Through a mixed-methods needs analysis, it was revealed that both alumni and current students as insiders and outsiders perceive that English is an important skill to master, with particular emphasis on speaking, listening, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Programs such as dialogue practice, vocabulary tests, and watching English media emerged as the most relevant activities to support these skills, while storytelling/*muhadoroh* and writing were considered less urgent which was in line with ESP and grammar as the least prioritized skills.

The findings also demonstrate that a reward-based system is more effective and preferable than punishment in motivating students to engage with English programs. Students and alumni as the insiders and outsiders believed that it can create a healthy competition and increase motivation which is in line with the cultural practices already familiar in the *pesantren* environment.

These highlight the importance of designing context-sensitive curricula for non-immersion environments. In such settings, where spontaneous use of English is limited, deliberate program design becomes essential to simulate language exposure and practice.

The insider-outsider approach to needs analysis allows the study to capture both immediate and long-term dimensions of language learning. This underscores the role of needs analysis as a critical tool for aligning instructional practices with learners' actual needs and contextual realities.

Finally, this study contributes to the existing literature by demonstrating the effectiveness of a mixed-methods needs analysis that integrates insider-outsider perspectives in a *pesantren* context. It also provides empirical evidence on English learning needs in a non-immersion Islamic boarding school, a context that has received relatively limited attention in previous research. By highlighting both linguistic and contextual factors, this study offers practical insights for developing more responsive and effective English language programs in similar educational settings.

It is expected that this study may provide a useful reference for other *pesantren* within the country. However, it is also acknowledged that this study was limited to a single *pesantren* context with a relatively small sample size, focusing only on junior high school students and alumni. The reliance on self-reported data may also introduce bias, while perspectives from broader stakeholders such as parents, policymakers, or external experts were not included. By incorporating larger and more diverse participant groups, as well as longitudinal approaches, subsequent research can provide a more comprehensive picture of how English programs may be designed to meet learners' academic and professional needs.

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