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Teachers Navigating Intercultural Tensions in the CEFR-informed English Language Teaching in Indonesian *Pesantren*

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Article information	
Abstract	This study examined whether the CEFR is culturally appropriate for English teaching in the context of Indonesian *pesantren*, Islamic boarding schools, where religious values deeply shape educational practices. It specifically investigated how teachers navigated intercultural tensions embedded in CEFR-oriented pedagogy. Drawing on a qualitative interpretive approach involving classroom observations, four English teacher interviews, and curriculum documents, this study explored how English language teachers navigated these tensions in practice. Referring mainly to the CEFR's plurilingual and pluricultural vision, which positions learners as social agents that mobilize their full linguistic and cultural repertoires, the study found that *pesantren* teachers did not view interculturality as conflicting with Islamic values. Instead, they reframed the CEFR-informed intercultural aims through religious and moral lenses that aligned with *pesantren* identity. Teachers also negotiated their professional agency within institutional and ideological constraints, selectively adopting CEFR principles while

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	maintaining religious expectations. Additionally, multilingual practices involving Indonesian, Arabic, and English languages illustrated an organic form of the CEFR's plurilingual competence, as teachers encouraged students to draw on all linguistic resources to support comprehension and meaning-making. In doing so, teachers acted as cultural, ideological, and linguistic mediators that selectively adapted the CEFR-informed practices to fit a value-oriented educational setting. The present study has demonstrated that the CEFR can be culturally appropriate when locally interpreted, recontextualized, and aligned with Islamic pedagogical commitments.
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1. Introduction

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) has become one of the most influential instruments in global language education since its publication in 2001 and the release of the *Companion Volume* in 2020. As a global framework, the CEFR promotes a model of language learning that reflects European sociocultural and communicative norms, which may not always align with the religious, moral, and intercultural values embedded in *pesantren* education. Yet, the CEFR's evolving orientation toward plurilingual and pluricultural competence offers conceptual entry points for rethinking its applicability in culturally rooted settings. According to CEFR Chapter 4 regarding plurilingual and pluricultural competence, the plurilingual vision values linguistic and cultural diversity at the level of the individual and positions learners as social agents that draw on their full linguistic and cultural repertoires in order to participate meaningfully in social and educational life (Council of Europe, 2020). As the CEFR 2001 Section 1.3 emphasizes, language users do not store languages

and cultures in separate mental compartments; instead, they build a holistic communicative competence in which languages interact, overlap, and mutually support each other (Council of Europe, 2001). This CEFR's orientation toward plurilingual and pluricultural competence resonates with the multilingual realities of Indonesian learners and the culturally integrative ethos of *pesantren*, where Arabic, Indonesian, local languages, and English naturally coexist in daily interactions.

Although the framework promotes plurilingualism and intercultural education, scholars argue that it does not fully capture the complexities of intercultural communication in diverse global contexts (Schneider, 2020). Concerns also arise about the cultural appropriateness of applying the CEFR beyond its original European setting, as many of its underlying assumptions, such as an emphasis on individual expression, openness to multiple worldviews, and secular communicative norms, are rooted in European social and philosophical backgrounds (Byram, 2021; Kramsch, 2013). When implemented in non-Western or faith-based environments, these assumptions may conflict with local educational cultures, leading to tensions between CEFR expectations and institutional or religious values (Fulcher, 2004; McNamara, 2011).

This concern is particularly salient in Indonesia, a country with the largest Muslim population in the world and a deeply plural education system. Within this system, *pesantren*, Islamic boarding schools, occupy a distinctive position as faith-based institutions that integrate religious instruction, character formation, and community engagement (Isbah, 2020; Lukens-Bull, 2010). English language education in *pesantren* is valued for its instrumental role in broadening students' access to global knowledge and communication. However, its integration into the *pesantren* curriculum is often negotiated carefully in order to ensure harmony with Islamic values, Arabic literacy, and local cultural traditions (Irham, 2023; Madkur & As'ad, 2024). Consequently, the adoption of CEFR-inspired pedagogies in *pesantren* settings introduces complex pedagogical and ideological tensions

around how English teachers cultivate intercultural communicative competence, as prescribed by the CEFR, while adhering to the moral and institutional expectations of a faith-oriented environment.

Teachers are situated at the heart of this negotiation. As front-line practitioners, they interpret, adapt, and often reshape CEFR-informed approaches to fit the moral and institutional ecology of their classrooms. Their pedagogical choices reveal not only how CEFR functions in practice but also how local values mediate its implementation. Existing research on CEFR in Asia has tended to emphasize policy-level alignment or macro-level adaptation (Alih et al., 2021; Jin et al., 2017) and portrayed public educational institutions (Nguyen et al., 2025; Nishimura-Sahi, 2023; Yusra et al., 2022), leaving the micro-level experiences and moral reasoning of teachers underexplored. Yet, in faith-based institutions such as *pesantren*, teachers play a dual role: they are both language educators and cultural custodians, responsible for ensuring that pedagogical innovation does not undermine religious and moral integrity.

This study sought to address this gap by investigating how English teachers in Indonesian *pesantren* engaged with the intercultural aims of the CEFR in their teaching practices. Drawing on qualitative data from classroom observations, interviews, and document analysis, this research explored how teachers navigated the tensions between global language education standards and the cultural-religious values embedded in their institutional context. By doing so, this study contributes to the growing literature on context-responsive pedagogy (Canagarajah, 2012; Holliday, 2021), offering insights into how intercultural language education frameworks can be meaningfully adapted to diverse socio-cultural realities. It also foregrounds the agency of teachers as cultural mediators, challenging simplistic notions of policy transfer and promoting a more nuanced understanding of CEFR implementation in religious schooling. Guided by these concerns, the study investigated how English teachers in Indonesian *pesantren* engaged with, interpreted, and adapted CEFR-informed pedagogical principles.

The central research question is "How do English teachers in Indonesian *pesantren* selectively adapt and mediate CEFR-informed pedagogies in ways that balance global standards with local cultural-religious values?"

The findings of this study are expected to enrich theoretical discussions of intercultural competence and contextual pedagogy, while offering practical insights for policymakers, teacher educators, and curriculum designers. More broadly, the study has argued that CEFR's relevance and sustainability in non-European settings depend not on replication but on reinterpretation, which is the teachers' capacity to indigenize global frameworks through dialogue with local moral and cultural traditions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Intercultural Communicative Competence in CEFR

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has become a defining feature of language education within the CEFR, especially with the publication of the *Companion Volume* (Council of Europe, 2020). The CEFR positions interculturality as integral to communicative proficiency, expanding its descriptors to include mediation, intercultural attitudes, and engagement across cultural boundaries. This approach reflects a broader paradigm shift from structuralist views of language to social-interactional models emphasizing identity, perspective-taking, and intercultural dialogue. The CEFR's articulation of ICC draws heavily on Byram's (1997) model, which conceptualizes the intercultural speaker as someone capable of critically comparing cultures, understanding social identities, and mediating interactions among culturally diverse interlocutors. Complementing Byram's work, scholars such as Beacco et al. (2016) and Zarate et al. (2008) highlight the pluricultural and plurilingual orientation of the CEFR, which encourages learners to mobilize diverse linguistic and cultural resources rather than strive for monolingual native-speaker norms.

However, the CEFR's promotion of intercultural openness is not ideologically neutral. Scholars such as Feng (2009), Guilherme (2002), and Risager (2007) argue that the CEFR's discourse reflects secular-humanist, liberal-cosmopolitan values embedded in European sociopolitical traditions. These assumptions surface in the framework's emphasis on individual autonomy, suspension of judgment, and egalitarian interaction—ideals that may not align with moral or doctrinal boundaries that structure educational life in religious or collectivist contexts. Kramsch (2013) further critiques the CEFR for positioning interculturality in abstract, decontextualized terms that may mask underlying power dynamics and cultural hierarchies.

Research in non-Western contexts increasingly documents how ICC frameworks can conflict with local cultural expectations. Studies in East Asia, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia, for example, show that intercultural descriptors often require reinterpretation or replacement when they involve culturally sensitive topics (Baker, 2015; Fang et al., 2024). In such settings, teachers frequently modify or reject the CEFR descriptors that promote attitudes perceived as conflicting with religious teachings, socially regulated behavior, or hierarchical norms. These findings underscore the need to view ICC not as a universal construct but as a culturally contingent practice negotiated by teachers and learners.

2.2 The CEFR Implementation in Non-Western Contexts

The global spread of the CEFR has prompted numerous studies on its localization and adaptability in diverse sociocultural environments. In East and Southeast Asia, countries such as Japan, China, Malaysia, and Indonesia have adopted the CEFR to various degrees in national curricula, teacher training, and assessment systems (Alih et al., 2021; Jin et al., 2017; Nishimura-Sahi, 2023; Yusra et al., 2022). As the CEFR adoption expands across Asia, research increasingly highlights the challenges of transferring a European-designed framework into linguistically, culturally, and ideologically diverse contexts. Scholars have pointed out that local implementation often involves selective appropriation rather than

wholesale adoption (Hamied & Musthafa, 2019; Kirkpatrick, 2007). Savski (2021), for instance, notes that while the CEFR can provide useful curricular structure, its global use often results in superficial alignment, particularly when local educators are pressured to adopt international standards without sufficient contextual adaptation. Such policy borrowing may privilege the symbolic value of the CEFR alignment over its pedagogical utility.

In several Asian contexts, teachers face tensions between the CEFR's communicative emphasis and prevailing pedagogical traditions. For example, in China and Japan, teachers often reconfigure the CEFR descriptors to align with exam-driven systems, teacher-centered methods, and collectivist classroom cultures (Fang et al., 2024; Kubota, 2020), and in Korea and Vietnam, teachers negotiate the CEFR implementation by selectively incorporating communicative tasks while retaining traditional grammar-translation methods to meet institutional expectations (Nguyen & Hamid, 2018). These adaptations reveal how the CEFR functions less as a universal template and more as a negotiable framework shaped by local constraints, identities, and classroom ecologies.

Importantly, scholars argue that the CEFR's cultural orientation influences not only content but also pedagogical assumptions. Holliday (2021) and Canagarajah (2012) emphasize that global frameworks often carry implicit Western norms about learner autonomy, interactional styles, and classroom discourse patterns. When transplanted into contexts where authority relations, religious ethics, or community norms differ substantially, such assumptions may generate classroom tensions that require creative mediation by teachers. These insights are directly relevant to Indonesian faith-based schools, where the CEFR-aligned curriculum reforms are increasingly promoted by national and regional education authorities.

2.3 English Language Education in *Pesantren*

Pesantren occupy a distinctive position in Indonesia's educational landscape as institutions that integrate religious learning, moral formation, and community life. Although traditionally centered on classical Islamic texts, many *pesantren* have expanded their curricula to include general subjects, particularly English, to respond to national reforms, global mobility, and increasing aspirations for international engagement (Alfisuma et al., 2025; Rahman et al., 2023). A large proportion of *pesantren* students recognize the value of acquiring English, particularly speaking skills, as a means of engaging with global challenges and strengthening their confidence in international da'wah or understanding while remaining rooted in Islamic principles (Farid & Lamb, 2020). Likewise, Sari (2023) found that although some students struggled with aspects of English learning, many have expressed appreciation for the innovative and student- centered pedagogical approaches offered, which they felt support their learning needs and reflect principles of authentic instruction. The curricular diversification, however, introduces a unique tension: while English is viewed as an important tool for accessing global knowledge, it is simultaneously approached with caution due to its perceived association with Western cultural values and secular worldviews.

Within this *pesantren* context, English language teaching is inseparable from the religious and moral mission of *pesantren*; English teachers frequently perform dual functions— not only as language instructors but also as moral guardians responsible for upholding Islamic values in the classroom (Alim et al., 2024). This dual mandate shapes pedagogical decisions in ways that differ markedly from mainstream schools. Decisions about materials, topics, and learning activities are filtered through questions of religious appropriateness, cultural alignment, and the moral development of students.

2.4 Sociolinguistic Perspectives on Language, Culture, and Education

Sociolinguistics offers a powerful lens to explore the complex relationships among language, culture, identity, and power in educational settings. Rather than

viewing language as a neutral tool for communication, sociolinguistic approaches highlight its role as a social practice shaped by ideological, cultural, and institutional forces (Heller, 2007; Pennycook, 2010). This perspective is particularly useful for examining how global language policies such as the CEFR interact with local educational contexts marked by distinct cultural and religious traditions.

Research in critical sociolinguistics has emphasized the importance of context in shaping how language norms are constructed, legitimized, and contested (Blommaert, 2010; Canagarajah, 2012). In multilingual and multicultural societies such as Indonesia, language education is deeply entangled with broader questions of identity, ideology, and social values. For instance, Canagarajah (2005) argues that global English language policies must be interpreted through the lens of local sociolinguistic realities, where communities exercise agency in appropriating or resisting dominant norms. This framework aligns closely with the concerns of the present study, which investigated how English teachers in *pesantren* negotiated the intercultural values embedded in the CEFR.

Furthermore, sociolinguistic studies of religious schooling have shown how language learning is mediated by spiritual, moral, and communal goals (Bigelow, 2018; Yaeger-Dror, 2014), often diverging from secular or Western conceptions of language use and interculturality. In Islamic educational contexts, teachers may reframe English language instruction to align with Islamic worldviews, integrating religious expressions, moral teachings, and multilingual practices that reflect both global aspirations and local commitments (Gu et al., 2022; Skourdoumbis & Madkur, 2020). These dynamics highlight the need for a sociolinguistically informed analysis of language education in *pesantren*, especially when global frameworks such as the CEFR are introduced. Drawing on these sociolinguistic perspectives, the present study sought to uncover how intercultural dimensions of the CEFR are interpreted, adapted, or resisted in a *pesantren* setting. It positions language policy not as a fixed blueprint but as a site of negotiation where teachers actively mediate between global standards and local cultural-religious values. This

approach also contributes to the broader understanding of context-responsive pedagogy, advocating for language education models that are attuned to the lived realities of learners and educators in diverse sociocultural contexts.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

As previously indicated, this study employed a qualitative interpretive approach grounded in critical sociolinguistics in order to explore how English teachers in *pesantren* engaged with the intercultural dimensions of the CEFR, and as suggested earlier, a sociolinguistic lens allows for a context-sensitive analysis of how language policies, pedagogical practices, and ideological positions intersect in classroom settings shaped by religious identity and local values (Canagarajah, 2013; Heller, 2007). Rather than testing hypotheses, this study aimed to understand the discourses, beliefs, and practices through which the CEFR is interpreted and localized in a traditional Islamic educational environment.

3.2 Research Site and Participants

The research was conducted at two *pesantren* in the province of Lampung, Indonesia, both of which have integrated English into their formal curriculum and are in the process of aligning their language instruction with the CEFR benchmarks, either formally or informally. These *pesantren* were selected through purposive sampling due to their institutional interest in international standards of education and their reputation for balancing religious and modern curricula. The study involved four English language teachers (T1-T4). In order to enhance transparency and to allow readers to contextualize the qualitative findings, the participants' demographic information is summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Demographic Information of the Participants

Participant	Gender	Age Range	Teaching Experience	CEFR Exposure
T1	Male	Early 30s	10 years	Informal (textbooks, policy documents)
T2	Female	Mid 30s	12 years	Formal (workshops, institutional training)
T3	Female	Early 40s	15 years	Formal (professional development programs)
T4	Male	Late 40s	14 years	Informal (teaching materials, peer discussion)

The participants varied in terms of gender, age, teaching experience, institutional roles, and exposure to the CEFR-related training. All of the participants had between 10 and 15 years of experience teaching English in *pesantren* contexts and had received training in both English pedagogy and Islamic studies. While some of the participants had engaged with CEFR through formal workshops or institutional programs, others were familiar with CEFR principles through textbooks, teaching materials, or internal policy discussions.

3.3 Data Collection

The data for this study were collected over three months from January to March 2025 using three complementary techniques. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers in order to explore their understanding of the CEFR, their perceptions of intercultural objectives, and their experiences negotiating these ideals within the *pesantren* environment. Second, classroom observations documented how intercultural elements, such as references to global cultures, moral values, and classroom language use, were introduced, adapted, or resisted during English lessons. Third, document analysis of two English syllabi

(referred as ES1 and ES2), four lesson plans (LP1-LP4), and training materials (TM1 and TM2) provided insights into how the CEFR was interpreted and operationalized at the institutional level. All of the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, and they were conducted in Indonesian as per the participants' linguistic preferences. Field notes were also taken during classroom observations in order to capture contextual details and non-verbal interactions that might not be evident in recordings.

3.4 Data Analysis

In order to analyze the interview transcripts, classroom observations, and institutional documents, this study employed the six-phase reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), as can be seen in the table below. This approach was chosen because it aligned with the study's interpretivist orientation and allowed for a flexible, recursive process through which patterns of meaning related to CEFR interpretation and interculturality in the *pesantren* context could be systematically identified, refined, and reported.

Table 2

Six Stages of Thematic Analysis of the Study

Stage	Description	Examples From Data
1. Familiarization	Reading and rereading interview transcripts, classroom observations, and documents while taking early analytic notes.	Notes included: "*teachers anxious about Western influence,*" "*Islamic framing of all discussions,*" and "*syllabus says CEFR, teaching does not.*"
2. Initial Coding	Line-by-line coding of all transcripts, field notes, and documents. Keeping codes broad and flexible.	Example codes: • *CEFR seen as external pressure* • *Avoidance of global cultural topics*

Stage	Description	Examples From Data
		•*Islamic reinterpretation of materials* • *Students hesitated discussing unfamiliar cultures*
3. Generating Initial Themes	Grouping similar codes to identify larger patterns across the data set.	Example clusters: • Codes about limited CEFR training + descriptor confusion → "Partial and pragmatic CEFR adoption" • Codes about avoiding certain topics + Islamic reframing → "Negotiating intercultural content within *pesantren* norms"
4. Reviewing Themes	Re-examining codes, rereading transcripts, merging overlapping themes, and removing weak ones.	Combined clusters into stronger themes: • *Institutional constraints* merged into "Tensions between global ELT standards and *pesantren* identity"
5. Defining and Naming Themes	Wring theme definitions, clarifying boundaries, and ensuring themes answered research questions.	Final theme names: • Selective CEFR appropriation as institutional strategy •Islamic reinterpretation of intercultural learning • Silent tensions in classroom interaction
6. Producing the Report	Integrating themes into findings chapter using interview quotes, observation extracts, and	Example reporting: "*Teachers reframed intercultural topics as moral lessons, demonstrating an Islamic reinterpretation rather than cultural comparison."*

Stage	Description	Examples From Data
	documents. Discussing reflexivity throughout.	

For this study, the analysis drew specifically on the B1 and B2 illustrative descriptors of plurilingual and pluricultural competence of the CEFR Companion Volume (2020). This decision aligned with the curricular level of the participating *pesantren*, all of which operate at the senior high school (SMA) level, where learners are typically expected to achieve competencies within the intermediate (B1-B2) proficiency range. These levels provided the most pedagogically relevant reference point for examining how teachers interpreted, adapted, and implemented intercultural learning objectives in the *pesantren* context.

3.5 Research Ethics

This study received ethical clearance from the Center for Research and Community Empowerment (LPPM) Universitas Islam Negeri Jurai Siwo Lampung, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Their participation was voluntary, and they were also fully informed that they could withdraw their participation from this study at any time.

4. Findings

4.1 Reframing Interculturality Through Religious and Moral Lenses

The first major theme revealed that *interculturality*, as articulated in the CEFR Companion Volume 2020, was viewed by *pesantren* English teachers not as something opposed to Islamic values, but as something that could be interpreted, filtered, and meaningfully integrated into a value-oriented learning environment. The CEFR's B2 descriptor of prulicultural competence (p.125) emphasizes the ability to "describe and evaluate the viewpoints and practices of their own and other social groups," to "explain cultural assumptions and stereotypes," and to "interpret cultural documents or events and relate them to one's own culture(s)." When examined closely, the teachers viewed that these competencies were

actually compatible with *pesantren's* long-standing emphasis on *tafakkur* (reflection), *akhlaq* (ethics), and the cultivation of cultural awareness through an Islamic lens. Teachers tended to contextualize CEFR's objectives; for example, viewing the descriptor on "recognizing that what one takes for granted may not be shared by others" as a natural extension of Islamic teachings on tolerance (*tasamuh*) and respectful engagement with difference.

During the interviews, three teachers expressed that the CEFR's intercultural goals could be implemented effectively as long as they were accompanied by guided moral framing. One teacher (T2) explained the following:

> *"CEFR actually encourages students to reflect on their own culture, values, and assumptions. In* pesantren*, we already teach students to think critically about their identity and how to behave with others. So, when we discuss other cultures, we help them compare, understand, and respond ethically—this is very much in line with our approach."*

Such perspectives suggested not a rejection of CEFR-oriented interculturality, but a reinterpretation of it as a platform for moral reasoning and character-building. When teachers facilitated discussions of global cultural practices—such as media representations, behavioral norms, or festivals—they guided students to "identify and reflect on similarities and differences in culturally determined behaviors" (p. 125) while relating them to Islamic values and local cultural norms. In this way, CEFR's intercultural descriptors became operational tools for encouraging ethical comparison, self-awareness, and respectful engagement with cultural diversity, all of which resonated with *pesantren's* pedagogical mission.

In the observations, the teachers consistently structured their classroom discussions to help students articulate aspects of their own cultural and religious background whenever they encountered global topics. This mirrored the CEFR

expectation that learners “can explain features of their own culture to members of another culture or explain features of the other culture to members of their own culture.” For example, in T1’s classroom, when reading a passage about school traditions in Japan and Canada, the teacher encouraged students to draw comparisons with *pesantren* routines such as *halaqah* (learning circle), *sholat jamaah* (performing prayer together), or communal dormitory practices. Rather than focusing solely on understanding other cultures, the lessons emphasized strengthening the students’ ability to express their own cultural identity confidently in English.

Similarly, classroom tasks were designed to help the students reflect on how Islamic values shaped their interpretations of global content. This aligned with the B1 descriptors, stating that learners “can explain in simple terms how their own values and behaviors influence their views of other people’s values and behaviors” (p. 125). T3, for example, often paused during lessons to guide students in articulating how concepts such as modesty, discipline, or community responsibility influenced their interpretation of certain cultural practices in the reading texts. This reflective process allowed the students to engage with differences without feeling pressured to adopt unfamiliar viewpoints, supporting an intercultural stance grounded in awareness rather than cultural relativism.

The integration of these descriptors into locally meaningful practices demonstrated that CEFR’s intercultural objectives were not incompatible with Islamic education; instead, they could be thoughtfully adapted to help students understand the global world while maintaining and articulating their own cultural and religious identities.

4.2 Negotiating Teacher Agency Within Institutional and Ideological Constraints

The second theme highlighted how English teachers in *pesantren* actively negotiated their professional agency while operating within institutional structures

and religious-ideological expectations. Although the CEFR encourages learner-centered, communicative, and intercultural approaches, the teachers in this context navigated complex tensions among pedagogical ideals, *pesantren* norms, and their personal convictions, resulting in strategies of adjustment and selective adoption.

Two teachers, T1 and T4, described the dual responsibilities they carried: delivering English instruction aligned with CEFR expectations while simultaneously serving as moral and religious role models for their students, as one of the teachers(T1) stated:

> *"I am not only an English teacher here. I am also a guide. The students look at me to show the right path—so I have to be careful with what and how I teach."*

This dual identity strongly shaped their pedagogical decision-making, including how they interpreted intercultural goals. For instance, CEFR B1 and B2 descriptors (p. 125) encourage learners to "explain features of their own culture to members of another culture" (B1) and to "describe and evaluate the viewpoints and practices of their own and other social groups" (B2). While the teachers were aware of these expectations, they tended to operationalize them cautiously, usually through structured discussions that foreground Islamic values. T4 commented that while the CEFR encouraged open exploration of cultural perspectives, *pesantren* expects teachers to maintain clear moral boundaries as can be seen in the excerpt below:

> *"We introduce other cultures, but the discussion must stay within values students understand. It cannot be too open-ended."*

Teachers also often relied on online resources or informal networks in order to make sense of the CEFR, often modifying it based on their teaching context.

This gap between top-down curriculum directives and on-the-ground pedagogical realities created space for both innovation and tension, as one teacher (T4) noted:

> *"We were told to implement CEFR-based teaching, but no one explained how they work in our context. So, we just adjusted them as needed."*

The classroom observations showed that the teachers exercised deliberate control over the classroom discourse as they navigated CEFR-informed practices. While the CEFR encourages interactional autonomy and intercultural exploration—such as the B1 descriptor in which learners "can discuss in simple terms the way in which things that may look 'strange' in another sociocultural context may be 'normal' for others" (p. 125)— the teachers frequently moderated these tasks to preserve institutional norms. For example, in a lesson designed for cultural comparison, the teacher (T4) asked students to describe "customs in different countries" (p. 125). Rather than inviting open discussion, the teacher selected culturally neutral examples (e.g., greeting styles, food preferences) and avoided topics that might lead to value-sensitive or controversial interpretations.

From the document analysis, the English syllabi referenced CEFR-aligned outcomes, but these outcomes were frequently adapted or reworded to align with religious values. For instance, a B1 outcome initially aligned with "explaining features of one's own culture to members of another culture" (p. 125) was reframed as follows:

> *"Explain aspects of Islamic and national culture in ways appropriate to global communication." (ES1)*

Similarly, B2 intercultural descriptors encouraging critical engagement with cultural practices were reframed to emphasize *evaluating cultural viewpoints through an Islamic ethical lens*. This modification reflected institutional expectations that intercultural learning should reinforce *akhlakul karimah* (noble

character) and religious identity rather than promote unfiltered intercultural openness. This theme underscored how teacher agency was central to the localization of the CEFR in religious settings; teachers were not passive implementers of global standards but active interpreters and negotiators, navigating between international frameworks and local ideological boundaries. Through a sociolinguistic lens, this process revealed the complex interplay among global language policy, teacher identity, and educational ideology, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the CEFR in faith-based contexts.

4.3 Multilingual Practices and the Recontextualization of English Learning

The third theme highlighted how multilingual practices, particularly the flexible use of Indonesian, Arabic, and English, shaped the recontextualization of English learning in *pesantren*. Rather than treating English as an isolated linguistic system, teachers and students actively mobilized their full linguistic repertoires to negotiate meaning. This aligned with the CEFR's descriptor of building on plurilingual repertoire, where learners "alternate efficiently between languages in their multilingual repertoire to increase the efficiency of communication" (B2). The interview data showed that teachers regularly encouraged students to bridge meaning across languages to deepen comprehension, as T2 and T4 explained:

> *"Sometimes I let them compare the English word with Arabic or Indonesian. If they know it in another language, they feel confident to understand it in English."*

> *"Many students sometimes are not interested if I speak full English, but when I include Arabic or Indonesian, they look interested and then participated the learning process better. They can also respond using mixed languages."*

This reflected the CEFR's descriptor that learners "can use what they have understood in one language to understand the topic and main message of a text in another" and "introduce expressions from another language when particularly apt for a concept, explaining them when necessary" (p. 125). The teachers' intentional use of multilingual comparisons demonstrated how plurilingual resources were leveraged to reduce cognitive load when learners encountered new or abstract concepts.

The observation data further revealed that multilingual scaffolding was structurally embedded in instructional routines. During reading lessons, texts were often presented alongside Indonesian or Arabic explanations, allowing students to "use parallel translations to develop comprehension in different languages" (p. 125). For example, when a student asked a teacher (T1) about everyday activities, he moved fluently between English, Arabic phrases such as *sholat subuh*, and Indonesian explanations:

> *"I wake up at five o'clock, kemudian kita sholat subuh dulu ya... that's the first activity."*

This fluid movement between languages also reflected B1-level plurilingual competence in which learners "creatively exploit their limited repertoires to cope with unexpected communicative situations" (p. 125). Such practices were not seen as interference but as pedagogical tools to clarify meaning, build connections, and support learners' comprehension. The teachers used these multilingual strategies to mediate intercultural understanding, grounding new concepts in familiar religious and linguistic frameworks. Knowing that translanguaging practice was allowed, students also drew on their prior exposure to Arabic to clarify English concepts, often grammatical terms such as *isim dhomir* for pronoun, *fi'il* for verb, and *kalimat hurf* for preposition. This embodied the CEFR expectation that learners "can recognize similarities and contrasts between the way concepts are expressed in different languages" (p. 126).

The document analysis indicated that textbooks and learning modules also supported this plurilingual orientation; the presence of bilingual glossaries, side-by-side vocabulary lists, and explanations that connected English with Indonesian and Arabic structures encouraged learners to "use contrasting grammatical structures to support comprehension" (B2 descriptor, p. 125). Such materials implicitly promoted a learning environment where multilingual navigation was not only permitted but pedagogically validated.

The findings showed that English learning in *pesantren* operated within a rich multilingual ecology rather than a monolingual English-only paradigm. Teachers and students "alternate between languages to facilitate comprehension and encourage peers to use the languages in which they feel most comfortable" (B2, p. 125). Such practices not only deepened understanding but also strengthened learners' identities as confident plurilingual speakers that integrated English meaningfully within their religious, cultural, and linguistic contexts.

5. Discussion

5.1 Localizing Intercultural Competence Within Value-Oriented Pedagogies

The findings indicated that intercultural competence, as framed by the CEFR, underwent a process of local reinterpretation when implemented in *pesantren* contexts. Rather than adopting CEFR's intercultural descriptors as culturally neutral or universally applicable, teachers actively aligned them with the institution's ethical, religious, and communal values. This demonstrated what Porto et al. (2018) and Risager (2018) describe as the situatedness of interculturality: educators inevitably draw on their cultural, moral, and institutional frameworks when mediating intercultural learning.

In the present study, the CEFR's intercultural goals, namely reflection, comparison, and empathetic engagement, were not viewed as foreign constructs but as parallel to Islamic concepts such as *tafakkur*, *akhlaq*, and *tasamuh*. This suggested that CEFR implementation was not a one-directional adoption of

European pedagogical ideology but was a dialogic process in which teachers interpreted global competencies through locally meaningful lenses. Such an approach aligned with research on CEFR adaptation in Asian contexts (Fang et al., 2024; Kubota, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2025), which emphasizes the importance of value harmonization rather than value replacement.

The teachers' reinterpretation also reflected a broader pedagogical stance: interculturality in *pesantren* was not simply about knowing differences but about cultivating ethical judgement; the teachers guided students to compare cultural practices while maintaining moral grounding, illustrating a term of critical interculturality, where engagement with difference was anchored in reflexivity rather than uncritical relativism (Dervin, 2016). The sensitivity with which teachers encouraged students to articulate Islamic values while exploring other cultural practices showed that intercultural learning could coexist with, and even strengthen, learners' cultural and religious identities.

The classroom examples drawn from the observation data— such as comparing Japanese and Canadian school routines with *pesantren* practices— demonstrated that CEFR-oriented intercultural tasks became opportunities for identity affirmation, not identity dilution. This resonated with scholars who argued that intercultural competence must include the ability to express one's own cultural background in international communication, not merely to understand others (Byram, 2021; Kramsch, 2013). In aligning the CEFR descriptors with familiar religious concepts, teachers constructed a learning environment where engaging with global content was perceived as safe, purposeful, and identity-affirming.

Overall, the discussion shows that the perceived tension between global frameworks and Islamic education is not inherent but mediated by pedagogical interpretation. By embedding CEFR intercultural objectives into a value-oriented framework, teachers in this study created a localized intercultural pedagogy that

promoted ethical reflection, self-awareness, and respectful engagement with diversity—while preserving the moral foundations of the *pesantren* tradition. This indicated that for these teachers the CEFR did not operate as an external imposition but became a flexible tool shaped by institutional ethos and teacher agency.

5.2 Teacher Mediation as a Site of Policy Adaptation

The second theme illustrated that CEFR implementation in *pesantren* contexts was fundamentally shaped by teacher mediation, confirming the central role of teacher agency in localizing global language policies. Rather than functioning as neutral transmitters of CEFR-based pedagogies, teachers in this study acted as policy interpreters, making situated decisions that reflected their dual identities as English educators and moral-religious guides (Menken & Garcia, 2010). This dual role required teachers to balance the CEFR's emphasis on learner autonomy and intercultural openness with institutional expectations that prioritized moral discipline and value-oriented learning.

This selective adoption of CEFR intercultural descriptors aligned with scholarship showing that global standards are never applied uniformly but are "recontextualized" through local ideologies (Leung & Scarino, 2016). In this case, teachers used the CEFR as a flexible resource, emphasizing descriptors that were compatible with Islamic notions of *akhlaq*, *adab*, and identity protection while downplaying those that might encourage unbounded exploration of cultural perspectives. The teachers' caution toward open-ended intercultural discussion was not simply resistance but an enactment of institutional responsibility—maintaining ethical boundaries while still engaging with global content.

This negotiation was especially visible in how the teachers managed classroom discourse; although the CEFR encourages dialogic interaction and intercultural exploration, the teachers exercised tight control over topics to avoid potentially sensitive or controversial areas. Such practices echoed findings in

faith-based education research, where teachers often filter global cultural content to preserve institutional ethos (Francis et al., 2021; Merry & Driessen, 2016). The decision to foreground culturally neutral examples in cultural comparison tasks indicated a pragmatic reconciliation of the CEFR goals with *pesantren* norms, ensuring that intercultural learning remained pedagogically productive without compromising religious expectations.

The document analysis reinforced this interpretive mediation. The reframing of CEFR descriptors—such as transforming "explaining one's own culture" into "explaining Islamic and national culture appropriately in global communication"—illustrated how institutional ideology shaped curricular interpretation. This adaptation demonstrated that CEFR descriptors are malleable and often "domesticated" to align with moral and ideological priorities (Canagarajah, 2012; McNamara, 2011). In the *pesantren* case, intercultural competence became an ethical practice grounded in Islamic values rather than a universalized skill set.

These findings collectively pointed to a nuanced form of teacher agency: one that was not merely about free choice but about navigating the ideological, institutional, and moral responsibilities embedded in religious schooling. The teachers simultaneously upheld the institution's value commitments and enacted their professional judgement in adapting the CEFR to their context. This layered negotiation contributed to broader conversations on the CEFR localization in multilingual and faith-based environments, showing that global frameworks gained practical meaning only when filtered through the identities, beliefs, and interpretive practices of teachers.

5.3 Plurilingual Mediation as a Pedagogical Asset in *Pesantren* English Learning

The third theme demonstrated that English learning in *pesantren* was fundamentally shaped by *plurilingual mediation*, a practice in which teachers and students fluidly drew on Indonesian, Arabic, and local languages to negotiate

meaning. Rather than superficial code-switching, these practices reflected a deeper pedagogical principle: English was learned not in isolation, but through the interdependence of learners' full linguistic repertoires. This finding resonated with the CEFR's conceptual shift from monolingual competence to plurilingual and pluricultural competence (Council of Europe, 2020), in which learners strategically mobilized their languages as interconnected resources for sense-making.

Current research in translanguaging and Islamic education supports this view. Multilingual practices enable learners to build meaning more efficiently by reducing cognitive barriers and fostering engagement (García & Lin, 2017). In the *pesantren* context, the inclusion of Arabic—already familiar to students through religious studies—provides culturally resonant cognitive "anchor points" that help learners to interpret English vocabulary and concepts. This pedagogical synergy illustrates how religious-linguistic capital can be repurposed to support foreign language learning, aligning with findings from multilingual Islamic schooling around the world (Pennycook, 2017).

The observation that teachers in the present study strategically moved between languages highlighted the role of teacher-led plurilingual orchestration. Rather than viewing translanguaging as student-driven alone, the teachers in this context actively designed multilingual scaffolds—parallel explanations, contrastive grammar comparisons, and mixed-language examples—in order to facilitate their comprehension. This practice mirrored what the CEFR conceptualizes as "alternating efficiently between languages to increase communicative efficiency" (p. 128), but in *pesantren* it carries additional cultural and epistemic value: it affirms students' multilingual identities and connects English meaning-making to Islamic knowledge practices. Thus, plurilingual mediation here is both cognitive and cultural.

The role of Arabic deserves particular attention. The students' use of Arabic grammatical categories (e.g., isim dhomir, fi'il, hurf) to interpret English reflected

cross-linguistic conceptual mapping, whereby prior linguistic knowledge supported the development of new grammatical understanding across languages (Cenoz & Gorter, 2022; Piccardo, 2020). This practice reframed *pesantren* learners not as novice English users, but as agentive multilinguals capable of transferring metalinguistic awareness across their linguistic repertoires. Such an orientation challenged deficit-based views of "non-English- dominant" learners and aligned with contemporary scholarship advocating for asset-based, plurilingual pedagogies, where learners' full linguistic resources were recognized as integral to meaning-making rather than sources of interference (Council of Europe, 2020; Garcia & Lin, 2017).

The document analysis further showed that the pedagogical ecosystem supported this plurilingual orientation. The bilingual and trilingual features of textbooks— glossaries, parallel texts, contrastive explanations— positioned multilingual navigation as a legitimate and encouraged learning strategy. This institutional validation was critical: it moved translanguaging from an informal classroom habit to an intentional pedagogical design. The presence of these features suggested that *pesantren* materials already anticipated and normalized linguistic hybridity, even if not framed explicitly within the CEFR terminology.

Together, the findings indicated that CEFR implementation in *pesantren* naturally aligned with its plurilingual principles, but through locally meaningful forms of mediation. Instead of adopting European plurilingual models wholesale, *pesantren* classrooms enacted a culturally grounded version shaped by the centrality of Arabic, religious learning traditions, and students' lived multilingual realities. This finding contributes to broader discussions on the CEFR localization by showing that plurilingual competence is not a prescriptive skillset but is a flexible construct that gains practical meaning when intertwined with local linguistic ecologies.

6. Conclusion

This study has shown that teachers made CEFR culturally appropriate through agency, modification, and guided moral framing, and that the CEFR's plurilingual and pluricultural orientations can be meaningfully recontextualized in Indonesian *pesantren*. The teachers reframed interculturality through Islamic moral perspectives, negotiated their agency within institutional-ideological boundaries, and drew on multilingual practices that naturally reflected CEFR's view of learners as social agents who mobilized all linguistic resources. These findings indicated that CEFR was not inherently culturally misaligned with *pesantren* education; instead, it became culturally appropriate when teachers reinterpreted its intercultural goals through religious values and adapt its plurilingual principles to existing practices involving Indonesian, Arabic, and English.

These findings carried several implications. They have demonstrated that CEFR can be culturally appropriate in faith-based contexts when implemented dialogically rather than prescriptively, emphasizing compatibility rather than universality. They have also highlighted the centrality of teacher agency and multilingual repertoires in localizing global language policies. At the same time, this study was limited by its focus on a small number of *pesantren* and teachers; it did not capture variations across regions, institutional types, or levels of the CEFR familiarity. Future research should examine how *pesantren* leaders and policymakers conceptualize the CEFR alignment, how learners themselves experience intercultural and plurilingual practices, and how similar dynamics unfold in Islamic or other faith-based educational systems. Comparative studies between *pesantren* and public schools may also illuminate how institutional ideology shapes the CEFR localization. Taken together, this study has contributed to a growing body of work showing that the CEFR becomes pedagogically meaningful not through uniform implementation, but through culturally situated processes of interpretation, negotiation, and adaptation.

7. About the Author

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9. Declaration of AI Use

The author declares that ChatGPT 5.0 was utilized solely for grammatical and spelling proofreading. The conceptualization, analysis, and interpretation of all data and ideas in this study remain entirely the author's own work.

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