

# Fostering Diversity Awareness in Indonesian Islamic Boarding Schools: Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy-Based Approach in Teaching English

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## ABSTRACT

Indonesia faces the challenges of intolerance and limited interfaith understanding despite its religious and cultural diversity. This study explores the integration of Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy (LKLB) in English teaching within pesantren to enhance students' diversity awareness. Pesantren, as traditional Islamic educational institutions, have an important influence on young Muslims' perspectives and can potentially promote interfaith harmony. English, as a lingua franca, facilitates access to diverse cultures and religions. The LKLB approach develops three competencies: personal (understanding one's own religion), comparative (understanding other religions), and collaborative (working with people of other faiths). This study aims to examine how Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy (LKLB) can be integrated into English teaching, how students respond to such instruction, and what pedagogical implications emerge from its implementation. This study is significant as it addresses the gap between religious moderation discourse and classroom-level pedagogical practice in faith-based education. Using an ethnographic approach, this research addresses three questions: (1) How is cross-cultural religious literacy integrated into English teaching in pesantren? (2) How do students respond to LKLB-based English instruction regarding their awareness of religious and cultural diversity? (3) What pedagogical implications emerge from implementing LKLB in English teaching? The findings demonstrate that LKLB-based English instruction fosters students' empathy, self-reflection, respect, and openness towards religious and cultural diversity. It contributes theoretically by widening religious literacy in ELT and pedagogically by offering a practical model for LKLB-based English instruction.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia, as the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, is home to various religions and diverse cultures (Raihani, 2018). However, the challenges of

intolerance and the lack of understanding of interfaith remain a big concern within pluralism (Muttaqin et al., 2021). Integrating religious and cultural literacy in educational spaces is necessary, particularly in Islamic institutions (Daddow et al., 2021; Ruslan & Irham, 2022). He proposes a movement from a single religious paradigm toward an epistemological framework that embraces the plurality and complexity of modern societies. Pesantren must not only strengthen internal religious values but also foster openness and dialogical engagement with other belief systems to build inclusive citizenship (Mala et al., 2024). As the oldest traditional Islamic education institution, it plays a crucial role in shaping the characters and perspectives of young Muslims in Indonesia. In spite of focusing on traditional Islamic education (Fatih, 2024), pesantren possibly becomes the agent in promoting harmony and interreligious awareness.

For decades, pesantren has become the backbone of Islamic education in Indonesia (Nurtawab & Wahyudi, 2022). Pesantren has produced ulama (Islamic scholars) and leaders in society. Even though pesantren customized the traditions, nowadays, pesantren has adapted its educational settings to the global era, like integrating general subjects such as the English language into its curriculum (Achmadin et al., 2024; Ridwan et al., 2025). The role of pesantren is not limited to transmitting religious knowledge but also involves character building, morality, and social identity of students. Evidently, pesantren have a unique position to promote religious and tolerant values.

In this context, English teaching can be a prospective medium. English, as a lingua franca, facilitates communication internationally and provides access to different cultures and religions (Imamah & Lee, 2023; Chen, 2023; Satriani et al., 2022). Indonesia's diverse ethnic and religious composition requires an educational system that fosters intercultural understanding and tolerance. Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), long rooted in traditional religious instruction, are increasingly integrating general subjects such as English to prepare students for global engagement (Alfisuma et al., 2025; Fitria, 2023). Pesantren education still lacks comprehensive interfaith education, contributing to a phenomenon of religious illiteracy (Cibro et al., 2023; Suyanto et al., 2024). Furthermore, this study investigates the use of cross-cultural religious literacy-based, or Literasi Keagamaan Lintas Bahasa (LKLB), in English teaching within pesantren to foster the awareness of diversity among students. This approach tries to introduce students to the basic understanding of diverse religious customs and cultures through relevant English teaching instructions and activities, and so it encourages the appreciation of diversity and cultivates the values of tolerance (Ridho, 2024).

English as a foreign language has been recognized as more than a linguistic transfer skill (Tsai, 2023). English is also used to facilitate understanding of intercultural dialogue (Byram & Wagner, 2018). By exposing students to authentic material and various cultures, English teachers can create a chance for students to explore different perspectives, challenge stereotypes, and enhance empathy. Inserting cross-cultural religious literacy into English learning could be an effective medium to discuss sensitive issues regarding religion constructively and informatively.

This study relies on the notion that teaching the English language can mediate intercultural and interreligious understanding. A cross-cultural religious literacy-based

approach in English teaching as the primary mechanism. Through the integration of instruction and activities that introduce students to religious diversity and global culture, students can enhance their understanding of other religions, such as beliefs, practices, and values. Besides that, students can develop their empathy and tolerance. It helps to understand and appreciate other people's opinions. Moreover, analyzing information objectively can build up critical thinking skills and facilitate constructive dialogue in which students discuss the differences of religions respectively and informatively.

Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy (LCLB) has emerged as a nationally endorsed approach to cultivate interfaith understanding by developing three competencies, namely personal (understanding one's own religion), comparative (understanding other religions), and collaborative (working with people of other faiths) (Barret et al., 2014; Leimena Institute, 2024). Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy relies on the ability to understand and interpret different cultures, beliefs, and religious practices with appreciation and responsibility (Dinham & Francis, 2015; Jackson, 2014). It is beyond factual knowledge about other religions, it evokes empathy, the ability to engage in constructive dialogue, and understanding about how religion shapes individuals and communities. This approach implies the importance of multiple faiths, not only a single religion.

Even though religious education and religious moderation developed, research that explores the use of interfaith-based English material in pesantren is limited (Ghufron & Rahman, 2022; Imamah, 2023; Mulyana, 2023). Besides that, the autoethnography approach, in which the teacher becomes a reflective researcher, is rarely implemented intensively in pesantren. It shows the need for research involving teachers' reflection and cross-religious and cultural literacy in English teaching. On the other hand, limited teacher training, fear of misinterpretation, and a lack of teaching models hinder such integration. As Shih (2024) asserts, culturally responsive teaching demands that educators go beyond the surface of cultural symbols to address students' lived realities and the learning process. Ibang et al. (2024) further emphasize the need for pedagogical strategies that build tolerance and global empathy, especially in faith-based institutions.

This study fills the gap by exploring how LCLB can be meaningfully applied in English classes to promote diversity awareness, echoing Banks' (2008) call for transformative citizenship education that requires students to act against injustice and foster diversity. Awareness of diversity involves acknowledgement, respect and appreciation towards individual and group distinctions, including religious, cultural, ethnic, and social backgrounds. Developing diversity awareness is crucial to create an inclusive environment, reduce prejudice, and prevent conflicts (Banks, 2008; Eden et al., 2024). In Indonesia, which is vulnerable to issues of tribes, religions, race, and groups, the initiative to foster the awareness of diversity becomes more urgent.

Despite the growing discourse on religious moderation and intercultural education in Indonesia, empirical research that integrates cross-cultural religious literacy within English language teaching (ELT) in pesantren contexts remains limited (Ghufron et al., 2024). Existing studies tend to examine religious moderation as a policy or curriculum level (Hasan & Juhannis, 2024; Mukhibat et al., 2024), while classroom-based

investigations are still scarce. This gap is significant given persistent concerns regarding engagement among students in faith-based institutions (Cibro et al., 2023; Suyatno et al., 2024).

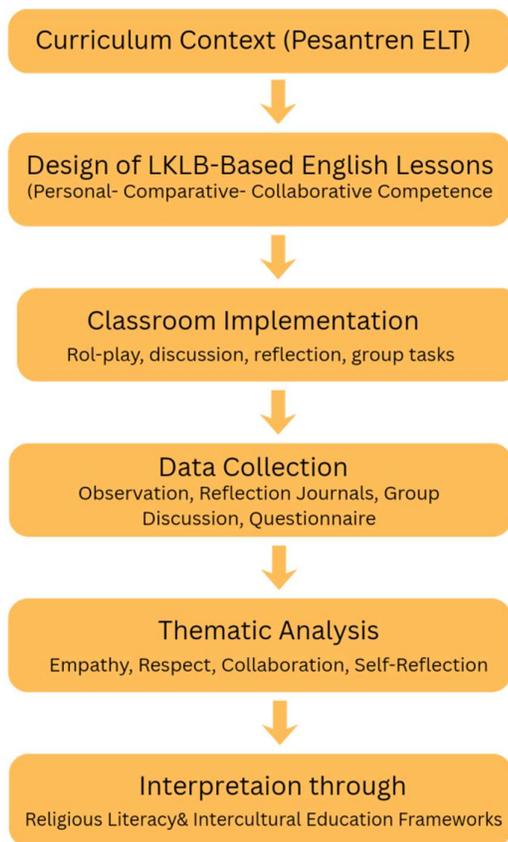
This study contributes to literature by providing an ethnographic account of integrating Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy (LKLB) into ELT practices within a *pesantren* context. It advances current scholarship by conceptualizing English classrooms as ethical and dialog spaces for interfaith engagement (Byram & Wagner, 2018), empirically demonstrating how LKLB can foster students' diversity awareness, empathy, and self-reflection, and offering methodological insights through a teacher as researcher perspective, which remains unexplored in Indonesian ELT research. Therefore, this study objective to explore how a cross-cultural religious literacy (LKLB) approach can be integrated into English Language Teaching (ELT) in an Islamic boarding school setting to enhance students' awareness of diversity and empathy across religious and cultural lines.

This research aims to delve (1) How is cross-cultural religious literacy integrated into English teaching in *pesantren*? (2) How do students respond to LKLB-based English instruction in terms of their awareness of religious and cultural diversity? (3) What pedagogical implications emerge from implementing LKLB in teaching English??

## 2. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative ethnographic approach. The teacher acted both as educator and participant-observer, embedding herself in the natural classroom setting to closely examine cultural interactions and the meaning-making process among students in response to cross-cultural religious content. It is suitable for examining educational practices within culturally and religiously embedded contexts, as it follows researchers to understand participants' perspectives in natural settings. In this study, Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy-Based (LKLB) instruction functions as the pedagogical approach (independent variable), while students' diversity awareness, including empathy, respect, openness, and reflective understanding of religious differences, serves as the learning outcome (dependent variable). Diversity awareness is conceptualized as a diverse dimension construct encompassing cognitive, affective, and ethical dimensions (Bannet, 2017). English Language Teaching operates as the instructional medium through which LKLB values are embedded, positioning ELT as an intercultural and ethical practice rather than a neutral linguistic activity. The *pesantren* context provides the sociocultural setting shaping students' identity formation and moral learning.

Ethnography was chosen to capture the contextual and nuanced aspects in response to interfaith literacy-based lessons. Moreover, the implementation of Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy which was integrated in English material through three main competencies: (1) Personal competence; students were invited to understand the values of their own religion through linguistic activities, (2) Comparative competence; students explored other religions perspective by the authentic scenarios, and collaborative competence; students worked together in groups to solve moral issues in diversity context.



**Figure 1.** Flowchart of the Qualitative Ethnographic Research Process

This Study was conducted in a 12th-grade classroom of 40 female students in MAS As'adiyah Sengkang, a well-established Islamic boarding school in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. Two English topics, "Asking and Offering Help" and "Conditional Sentences," were selected and inserted with LKLB values. This study took place over two instructional units in the second semester of the academic year, within a formal English class at Pondok Pesantren As'adiyah Sengkang, South Sulawesi, Indonesia.

Data were collected through (1) observation to note the classroom interaction and students' emotional responses during Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy activities conducted, (2) students' reflection journal which students wrote the daily reflections about the openness towards diversity, (3) group discussions that used to deepen collaborative understanding and moral imagination, and (4) an adapted questionnaire as a tool to assess religious tolerance and multicultural to obtain quantitative perspective data. The instrument was drawn from multicultural and religious tolerance assessment tools.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, identifying patterns that emerged in students' engagement with LKLB-based material. The codes were grouped into broader categories including awareness of religious diversity, empathy, collaborative communication, and moral imagination. Validity analysis was strengthened by the crossed analysis of questionnaire statistics and the qualitative narration of student journals.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### Results

This research indicated that LKLB integration had a significant influence on students' sensitivity to diversity. Three core themes emerged from qualitative data: (1) Empathy and Moral Imagination: Students articulated a deeper ability to imagine life from the perspectives of others, including people of different faiths. (2) Respect and collaboration: lessons encouraged mutual respect and highlighted the benefits of cooperative communication. (3) Self-reflection: learners showed increased awareness of their beliefs and greater openness to others' worldviews. Even though there was an inconvenient attitude in the initial learning process, the discussion mediated by the teacher could create an inclusive classroom environment to discuss diversity.

Other than that, adapted questionnaire results showed that 82.5% (33 of 40 students) of participants felt that LKLB-based instruction helped them value religious and cultural differences. A majority also reported feeling more motivated and engaged when lessons were contextualized with real-life interfaith scenarios.

**Table 1.** Students' Responses to LKLB-Based English Instruction Questionnaire

No	Questionnaire Item (Summary)	SA n (%)	A n (%)	N n (%)	D n (%)	SD n (%)
1	LKLB lessons help me respect people of different religions	18 (45.0)	15 (37.5)	5 (12.5)	2 (5.0)	0 (0)
2	English lessons increased my understanding of religious diversity	16 (40.0)	17 (42.5)	4 (10.0)	3 (7.5)	0 (0)
3	I can imagine how people from other faiths live and think	15 (37.5)	16 (40.0)	6 (15.0)	3 (7.5)	0 (0)
4	LKLB-based activities encourage empathy and tolerance	17 (42.5)	14 (35.0)	6 (15.0)	3 (7.5)	0 (0)
5	I feel more comfortable discussing religious differences respectfully	14 (35.0)	16 (40.0)	7 (17.5)	3 (7.5)	0 (0)
6	Group activities helped me collaborate with classmates respectfully	19 (47.5)	13 (32.5)	5 (12.5)	3 (7.5)	0 (0)
7	LKLB lessons made me reflect on my own beliefs	15 (37.5)	17 (42.5)	5 (12.5)	3 (7.5)	0 (0)
8	I am more open to different religious viewpoints after the lessons	16 (40.0)	15 (37.5)	6 (15.0)	3 (7.5)	0 (0)
9	English lessons became more meaningful with real-life interfaith examples	18 (45.0)	14 (35.0)	5 (12.5)	3 (7.5)	0 (0)
10	LKLB-based English learning increased my motivation and engagement	17 (42.5)	15 (37.5)	5 (12.5)	3 (7.5)	0 (0)

Note:

SD : Strongly Disagree

D : Disagree

N : Neutral

A : Agree

SA : Strongly Agree

Across all items, the quantitative data indicate a strongly positive student response to LKLB-based English instruction. Items 1 and 2 focused on students' respect for people of different religions and their understanding of religious diversity. For Item 1, 33 students (82.5%) either strongly agreed or agreed that LKLB-based lessons helped them respect individuals from different religious backgrounds. Similarly, Item 2 showed that 82.5% of students perceived an increased understanding of religious diversity through English instruction. Only a small proportion of students (7.5%) expressed disagreement, indicating limited resistance to the approach.

Students' ability to empathize and imagine the perspectives of people from different faiths was measured through Items 3 and 4. The data show that 77.5% of students agreed that they could better imagine how people of other religions live and think, while the same proportion acknowledged that LKLB-based activities encouraged empathy and tolerance. Neutral responses ranged from 12.5% to 15%, suggesting that some students were still developing their empathetic understanding but were not opposed to the learning process.

Items 9 and 10 focused on learning engagement and motivation. The results show that 80% of students perceived English lessons as more meaningful when real-life interfaith scenarios were incorporated, and the same percentage reported increased motivation and engagement. This indicates that contextualizing English learning with LKLB values enhanced students' interest and active participation in the classroom.

The quantitative findings demonstrate that the majority of students positively received LKLB-based English instruction. In total, 82.5% of participants consistently expressed favorable perceptions of the approach across items related to diversity awareness, empathy, collaboration, self-reflection, and engagement. Neutral responses imply diverse degrees of preparedness among students, whereas low levels of dissent signify negligible opposition. These patterns provide empirical support for the effectiveness of integrating cross-cultural religious literacy into English teaching in a pesantren context.

## Discussion

This study explored the integration of Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy-Based (LKLB) instruction in English teaching within an Islamic boarding school, examining students' responses and the resulting pedagogical implications. The findings demonstrate that LKB-based English instruction can meaningfully foster students' awareness of religious and cultural diversity, empathy, and reflective engagement. These results align with established theories regarding religious literacy, intercultural

education, and transformative citizenship. Supported by both qualitative insights and quantitative data, this study demonstrated how diversity awareness can be grown through everyday classroom interaction in faith-based institutions (Martínez-Ariño & Teinturier, 2019).

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research emphasizing the potential of religious literacy to foster empathy and intercultural understanding (Dinham & Francis, 2015). However, while earlier studies largely focus on religious education or policy discourse (Imamah & Lee, 2024; Suyanto et al., 2024), the present study extends this body of work by demonstrating how ELT can function as a practical and dialogic site for interfaith engagement within a pesantren context.

Unlike Ghufroon et al. (2024), this study relies on ethnographic evidence of students' effective and ethical development in secondary pesantren education. The findings also address challenges identified by Rahmat and Yahya (2022) regarding teachers' hesitation in integrating values into ELT by illustrating how structured LKLB activities can facilitate respectful and meaningful dialogue.

### **Empathy and Moral Imagination: Moving Beyond Cognitive Understanding**

The study reveals that students developed a deeper ability to imagine life from the perspectives of people of different faiths, as evidenced by empathy and moral imagination. This outcome is strongly related to Banks (2008) and Rabl et al. (2020), who stated that diversity awareness involves affective and ethical dimensions, not only cognitive recognition of difference. This finding suggests that LKLB-based English instruction enabled students to humanize other religions, which is a critical step in reducing and fostering inclusive attitudes.

From a cross-cultural religious literacy perspective, this result supports Dinham and Francis's (2015) and Jackson's (2014) argument that religious literacy must move beyond factual knowledge toward empathetic interpretation of how religion shapes people's lives. Recent studies emphasize that empathy and moral imagination are central outcomes of effective religious literacy education, particularly in plural societies (Shaw, 2020). In this study, English learning activities such as role-plays and interfaith scenarios embedded in Asking and Offering Help and Conditional Sentences topics provided students with narrative and dialogic spaces to engage emotionally and ethically with diversity.

Furthermore, the pesantren context also strengthens this finding. As Badrudin (2022) note, pesantren education emphasizes moral character and ethical practice. LKLB integration appears to build upon this moral foundation by extending students' empathy beyond intra-religious boundaries. This supports notion that Islamic education calls for embracing dialogical engagement with pluralism while maintaining a strong religious identity (Sahin, 2018; Tuna, 2024).

This pedagogical practice is supported by Díaz-Tejo and Vega-Ramírez (2025) argument that Islamic educational institutions need to move beyond a single-religious paradigm toward an epistemological framework that acknowledges plurality and complexity. Rather than weakening Islamic identity, LKLB-based instruction in this

study reinforced students' understanding of their religious values while simultaneously cultivating openness toward others. This observation supports the notion that pesantren can function as agents of inclusive citizenship and interreligious harmony, as suggested by [Fatih \(2024\)](#).

Moreover, the teacher's role as an insider-researcher allowed for culturally responsive instruction that respected pesantren norms while engaging students with global perspectives. This finding echoes [Shih's \(2024\)](#) assertion that culturally responsive teaching must be rooted in learners' lived realities, rather than superficial cultural references.

### **Respect and Collaboration: English as a Dialogic and Ethical Space**

[Byram and Wagner \(2018\)](#) views that the English language can serve as a medium for intercultural and interreligious dialogue rather than merely linguistic skill development. This study reveals how LKLB-based English instruction fostered cooperative communication and mutual respect. By inserting LKLB values into communicative tasks, the English classroom became a dialogic space where students practiced respectful interaction across diversity.

This finding contradicts earlier studies that portray English teaching in pesantren as largely text-centred and exam-oriented, with limited engagement in social or ethical issues. Instead, the present study illustrates that when English instruction is contextualized with real-life interfaith scenarios, it can cultivate collaborative skills and respectful attitudes. As [Hernandez and Kose \(2012\)](#) stated the model of intercultural sensitivity stresses interaction and cooperation as key mechanisms for alleviating bias.

Recent research further strengthens this argument. [Abdulhasan \(2024\) and De Hei et al. \(2020\)](#) argue that intercultural communicative competence develops most effectively through dialogic, collaborative learning that encourages learners to negotiate meaning and values. In line with these notions, the students in this study learned to appreciate cooperative communication as a means of navigating difference, which is represented by the principles of religious moderation promoted by Kementerian Agama, particularly tolerance and non-violence ([Rusyana et al., 2023](#)).

### **Self-Reflection: Strengthening Identity Through Openness**

Self-reflection indicates that students became more aware of their beliefs while also showing greater openness to other worldviews. In a faith-based educational setting, where concerns often arise that exposure to religious diversity may weaken students' religious identity, this finding holds particular significance. Contrary to such assumptions, the findings suggest that LKLB-based English instruction encouraged reflexive engagement that strengthened, rather than diluted, students' sense of self.

This finding is in line with [Banks' \(2008\)](#) view that diversity education should promote critical self-awareness alongside understanding of others. It also reflects [Jackson's \(2014\)](#) opinion of reflexivity in religious literacy, where learners situate their beliefs in relation to others through respectful comparison. Recent studies confirm that reflective pedagogies in religious education enhance moral maturity and openness

without undermining faith commitment (Cibro et al., 2023; Suyanto et al., 2024). The use of reflection journals and guided discussion in this study allowed students to process new perspectives thoughtfully and safely. It is related to Shih's (2024) argument that culturally responsive teaching must address learners' identities and lived experiences, creating conditions for meaningful self-examination and ethical growth.

In addition, the questionnaire results provide strong support for the previous findings. 82.5% of students perceived LKLB-based instruction as helping to value religious and cultural differences, indicating a high level of learner endorsement. This finding reinforces Malewski et al. (2012) claim that experiential and contextualized learning is more effective than abstract moral instruction in fostering diversity awareness. Moreover, students' increased motivation and engagement when lessons were contextualized with real-life interfaith scenarios supports recent ELT research emphasizing relevance and authenticity as drivers of learner engagement (Rahmat & Yahya, 2022). In the pesantren context, where English is often viewed as secondary to religious subjects, LKLB integration reconstructs English as a meaningful subject connected to students' moral and social realities. It links with the Merdeka Belajar principle of contextual, student-centered learning (Ridho et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the findings confirm that LKLB-based English teaching can effectively foster empathy, respect, collaboration, and self-reflection among students. It can be introduced through language education, supporting the view that religious literacy should move beyond factual knowledge toward dialogue and reflective interaction. This study strengthens the argument that pesantren are not only guardians of religious tradition but also strategic spaces for raising inclusive, tolerant, and globally engaged citizens in Indonesia's plural society. It also widens intercultural communicative competence theory by positioning English classrooms in faith-based institutions as ethical spaces for identity negotiation and pluralistic learning (Byram, 2014).

On the other hand, the findings suggest that English teachers in pesantren can integrate LKLB without eroding religious identity. Curriculum developers may embed interfaith scenarios within communicative English topics, while teacher education programs should prepare educators to mediate sensitive discussions and create psychologically safe learning environments. These implications align with Indonesia's religious moderation agenda emphasizing tolerance and non-violence.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This research firmly proves that Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy (LKLB) is not merely supplementary material but rather an essential instrument that can be organically integrated into English language teaching (ELT) in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren). Through this approach, English transforms from a mere technical communication tool into a dialogical and ethical platform that broadens the horizons of awareness of diversity. The findings highlight three main pillars: (1) Strengthening Empathy: Language instruction that includes cross-cultural literacy can diminish bias and cultivate empathy for divergent beliefs. (2) Reflective Identity: Students learn a foreign language and engage in in-depth reflection on their identities within the context

of a pluralistic global society. (3) Reconstructing the Role of Islamic Boarding Schools: This research confirms the position of Islamic boarding schools as strategic educational institutions in producing inclusive, moderate citizens who can interact respectfully across religious differences. Overall, this integration confirms that culturally responsive pedagogy is key to creating harmony in a pluralistic society through the language classroom.

As a suggestion, teachers are advised to develop English language teaching materials that utilize texts with themes of peace, tolerance, and cultural comparison without neglecting the core values of Islamic boarding schools. English teachers need to be equipped with religious moderation skills to be able to manage sensitive discussions in the classroom wisely and inclusively. Given the limitations of this study, further researchers are advised to conduct longitudinal studies to determine whether this awareness of diversity persists after students graduate and enter society. Furthermore, future research could compare the effectiveness of religious literacy-based ELT in Islamic boarding schools with that of public schools or other faith-based institutions to identify the unique challenges in each context.

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