

Language Festival and Multicultural Education Promoting Cross-Cultural Communication in Islamic Boarding Schools

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Info Artikel

Submitted: 26/1/26

Accepted: 5/3/26

Published: 27/04/26

Keywords:

Cross-Cultural
Communication,
Intercultural
Communicative Competence,
Islamic Boarding School,
Multicultural Education,
Language Festival

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Abstract

This study examines the role of language festivals in promoting multicultural education and enhancing cross-cultural communication in Islamic boarding schools. Using a qualitative case study approach, the research was conducted in a pesantren environment that implements Arabic and English language festivals as part of its educational program. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis involving students, teachers, and organizers. The findings reveal that language festivals function as experiential learning spaces that facilitate the internalization of multicultural values such as tolerance, respect, and inclusivity. In addition, these activities significantly improve students' intercultural communicative competence, as reflected in their ability to use language contextually, adapt to diverse cultural interactions, and collaborate across backgrounds. The study also finds that festival-based learning contributes to the creation of an inclusive and collaborative educational environment. Theoretically, this research strengthens intercultural communicative competence and multicultural education frameworks by demonstrating their practical implementation in pesantren contexts. Practically, it suggests that language festivals should be systematically integrated into educational programs to support both linguistic and intercultural development. This study contributes to the growing discourse on innovative, experiential, and culturally responsive pedagogies in Islamic education

Introduction

In the contemporary global era, education is increasingly required to respond to cultural diversity and linguistic plurality. Multicultural education has emerged as a strategic approach to fostering tolerance, inclusivity, and mutual respect among learners from diverse backgrounds. In this context, educational institutions are responsible not only for transmitting knowledge but also for shaping students' intercultural awareness and communicative competence. Multicultural education emphasizes values such as



equality, justice, tolerance, and respect for diversity, which are essential for building harmonious societies in plural contexts (Birroh et al., 2022; Mahfuds & Machmud, 2023). These values are particularly relevant in Indonesia, a nation characterized by its socio-cultural and linguistic diversity.

Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) represent unique educational environments where multicultural interactions occur naturally. Students (santri) come from various regions, ethnicities, linguistic backgrounds, and socio-cultural contexts, forming a microcosm of Indonesian diversity. Within this setting, multicultural education is not merely conceptual but is embedded in daily practices, social interactions, and institutional culture. Previous studies have shown that pesantren play a significant role in promoting tolerance, inclusivity, and peaceful coexistence through both formal and hidden curricula (Muhajir et al., 2025; Rasyid et al., 2022). Moreover, the boarding system enables continuous interaction among students, which strengthens intercultural understanding and social integration.

In addition to multicultural values, language plays a crucial role in facilitating cross-cultural communication. The use of multiple languages, particularly Arabic and English, is a distinctive characteristic of many modern Islamic boarding schools. Language is not merely a tool of communication but also a medium for expressing identity, negotiating meaning, and building social relationships. Studies indicate that students in pesantren actively adjust their language styles according to social contexts, demonstrating sociolinguistic awareness and communicative adaptability (Mauludiyah et al., 2024). Therefore, integrating language learning with multicultural education can significantly enhance students' cross-cultural communication competence.

One innovative approach that integrates language learning and multicultural education is the implementation of language festivals. Language festivals provide experiential learning spaces where students actively engage in linguistic practices, cultural performances, and collaborative activities. Such events promote authentic communication, creativity, and intercultural interaction beyond formal classroom settings. However, despite the growing interest in multicultural education and language learning in pesantren, limited studies have specifically examined how festival-based activities contribute to the development of cross-cultural communication skills.

This study addresses this gap by investigating the role of language festivals in promoting multicultural education and enhancing cross-cultural communication in Islamic boarding schools. By focusing on festival-based learning activities, this research offers a novel perspective on how informal and experiential educational practices can support the development of both linguistic competence and multicultural awareness. The findings are expected to contribute to the broader discourse on innovative pedagogical models in Islamic education, particularly in integrating language learning with multicultural values in a holistic and contextual manner.

Research Method

This study employed a qualitative research design using a case study approach to explore the role of language festivals in promoting multicultural education and enhancing cross-cultural communication in Islamic boarding schools. A qualitative case study is particularly appropriate for investigating complex educational phenomena within their real-life context, allowing an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, interactions, and meanings (Yin, 2023; Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This approach enables the researcher to capture the dynamics of festival-based learning as an experiential and culturally embedded practice in pesantren environments.

The research was conducted at an Islamic boarding school that implements Arabic and English language festivals as part of its educational program. The language festival studied was the 100th Gontor Celebration, a national-level event involving 44 Islamic boarding schools. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, involving students, language instructors, and organizers who actively participated in the festival activities. This sampling strategy ensures that data are obtained from individuals who possess rich and relevant experiences related to the research focus (Wibowo et al., 2024). The number of participants was determined based on data saturation, where no new significant information emerged from additional data collection. Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the research participants.

Data analysis followed an interactive model consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Thematic analysis was applied to identify patterns related to multicultural education values and cross-cultural communication competencies. This process involved coding, categorizing, and interpreting data iteratively to construct meaningful themes. Such an analytical approach is widely used in qualitative case studies to reveal nuanced insights into educational practices and learner experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Table 1. Participants' Demographic Profile

Participant Code	Role	Age	Region of Origin	Length of Stay (Years)	Involvement in Language Festival
P1	Student	17	East Java	3	Speech Contest Participant
P2	Student	18	West Java	4	Drama Performer
P3	Student	17	Central Java	3	Language Ambassador
P4	Student	19	South Sumatra	5	Committee Member
P5	Student	18	West Nusa Tenggara	4	Debate Participant
P6	Teacher	30	East Java	6	Language Supervisor
P7	Teacher	35	Yogyakarta	8	Festival Coordinator
P8	Organizer	22	Jakarta	2	Event Organizer
P9	Organizer	24	Central Java	3	Program Coordinator
P10	Student	17	Banten	3	Poetry Reading Participant

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Figure 1. Research Design of Language Festival Study



To ensure trustworthiness, this study applied credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was achieved through triangulation of data sources and member checking, while transferability was supported by providing thick descriptions of the research context. Dependability and confirmability were ensured through audit trails and reflective documentation during the research process. Furthermore, this study aligns with experiential learning perspectives, where learning is understood as a process of transforming experience into knowledge through active participation and reflection (Pham et al., 2026; Wibowo et al., 2024).

Results and Discussion

Results

The findings of this study reveal that the implementation of the language festival plays a significant role in strengthening multicultural education and promoting cross-cultural communication among students in Islamic boarding schools. Based on thematic analysis of interviews, observations, and document analysis, three major themes emerged: (1) internalization of multicultural values, (2) enhancement of cross-cultural communicative competence, and (3) development of collaborative and inclusive learning environments.

Table 2. Thematic Findings of Language Festival Implementation

Theme	Sub-theme	Evidence (Data)	Interpretation
<i>Multicultural Values</i>	Tolerance, Respect	Kutipan wawancara	Internalization
<i>Communication Skills</i>	Confidence, Adaptation	Observasi	ICC development
<i>Collaboration</i>	Teamwork, Inclusion	Dokumentasi	Social cohesion

First, the language festival serves as an effective medium for internalizing multicultural values such as tolerance, respect, and mutual understanding. The findings indicate that students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds actively engage in festival activities, including speech contests, drama performances, and cultural

exhibitions. These activities provide opportunities for students to appreciate differences and build positive social relationships. One student (P3) stated, "I come from West Java, and my friend is from South Sumatra. During the festival preparation, we learned about each other's cultures and traditions. It made me realize that differences are something to celebrate, not to fear." This result is consistent with previous studies showing that multicultural values in pesantren are not only taught conceptually but also practiced through daily interactions and extracurricular activities (Iqbal & Ridwan, 2025; Mardela & Piliang, 2025). The integration of such values into experiential activities strengthens students' awareness of diversity and promotes harmonious coexistence.

Second, the study finds that the language festival significantly enhances students' cross-cultural communicative competence. Students demonstrate increased confidence in using Arabic and English in authentic communicative contexts, particularly during interactive performances and collaborative tasks. The use of multilingual practices, including code-switching and translanguaging, allows students to negotiate meaning effectively and express their ideas more fluently. A teacher (P6) observed, "Before the festival, many students were hesitant to speak in English or Arabic. But during the events, they were actively communicating, even making jokes in both languages. Their confidence grew tremendously." This finding aligns with research indicating that multilingual practices in pesantren foster communication skills, creativity, and cultural understanding (Umniyah et al., 2024). Additionally, students' ability to adapt language styles based on social context reflects their growing sociolinguistic awareness, which is essential for cross-cultural communication (Mauludiyah et al., 2025).

Third, the language festival contributes to the development of a collaborative and inclusive learning environment. The findings show that students work together in organizing events, preparing performances, and participating in competitions, regardless of their cultural or regional backgrounds. This collaborative engagement fosters a sense of unity, shared responsibility, and mutual support among students. An organizer (P8) explained, "We had students from 44 different pesantren working together on the same stage. There was no competition between regions; instead, they supported each other. It was beautiful to see." Such findings support earlier research emphasizing that pesantren environments naturally promote inclusivity through collective activities and shared living systems (Iqbal & Ridwan, 2025).

The document analysis of the language festival reveals that the program was designed as a large-scale national event involving 44 Islamic boarding schools, indicating a high level of cultural diversity among participants. The festival included various competition categories such as debate, storytelling, public speaking, and short movie production, which collectively represent multiple dimensions of communicative competence. These structured activities provide authentic opportunities for students to practice language skills in meaningful contexts.

Furthermore, the objectives of the festival explicitly emphasize the development of linguistic competence, self-confidence, and intellectual contribution. This indicates that the program is not limited to language acquisition but extends to character building and intellectual engagement. The inclusion of seminar activities and the inauguration of a language laboratory also reflects institutional commitment to sustainable language development.

Overall, the results demonstrate that the language festival is not merely a linguistic event but also a powerful pedagogical tool that integrates language learning with multicultural education. It facilitates the development of intercultural competence, strengthens social cohesion, and enhances students' ability to communicate effectively

across cultural boundaries. These findings highlight the importance of incorporating experiential and event-based learning models in Islamic boarding school education to address the challenges of diversity in contemporary educational contexts.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that language festivals function as an effective pedagogical medium for integrating multicultural education with cross-cultural communication practices in Islamic boarding schools. These results can be critically interpreted through the lens of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and multicultural education theories, particularly those proposed by Byram and Banks.

From Byram's perspective (1997), intercultural communicative competence involves not only linguistic proficiency but also attitudes (curiosity and openness), knowledge (of social groups and cultures), skills of interpreting and relating, and critical cultural awareness. The findings of this study indicate that students participating in language festivals develop these dimensions through authentic interactions, collaborative performances, and exposure to diverse cultural expressions. For instance, students' ability to negotiate meaning through multilingual practices and adapt their communication styles reflects the development of intercultural skills and sociolinguistic competence. This aligns with recent studies emphasizing that experiential and interaction-based learning environments significantly contribute to the development of ICC in multilingual contexts (Wibowo et al., 2024; Abdul Khalek & Wong, 2026). Thus, the language festival can be positioned as a practical embodiment of Byram's ICC model within the pesantren context.

In relation to Banks' theory of multicultural education (2020), which highlights content integration, knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and empowering school culture, the findings reveal that language festivals contribute to several of these dimensions. The integration of cultural performances and multilingual activities reflects content integration, while students' active participation in diverse groups supports prejudice reduction and social cohesion. Furthermore, the collaborative nature of festival activities fosters an inclusive learning environment that aligns with the principles of equity pedagogy. Recent research confirms that multicultural education is most effective when implemented through participatory and context-based approaches rather than purely theoretical instruction (Mahfuds & Machmud, 2023; Mardela & Piliang, 2025). Therefore, the language festival serves not only as a linguistic platform but also as a transformative educational practice that supports multicultural learning objectives.

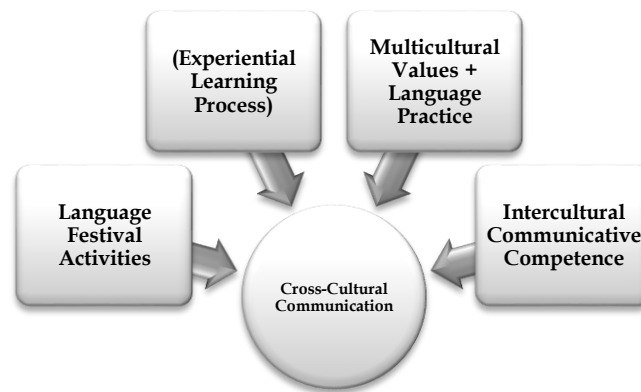


Moreover, this study extends previous research by highlighting the role of festival-based learning as a form of experiential learning. Unlike traditional classroom instruction, language festivals provide authentic contexts where students actively construct knowledge through participation, reflection, and social interaction. This supports the argument that experiential learning enhances both linguistic competence and intercultural understanding by situating learning in meaningful social practices (Pham et

al., 2026; Wibowo et al., 2024). In this sense, the findings contribute to the growing body of literature that advocates for innovative, student-centered pedagogies in language and multicultural education.

Another important contribution of this study lies in its contextual specificity. While previous studies have examined multicultural education and language learning in general educational settings, this research provides empirical evidence from Islamic boarding schools, which possess unique characteristics such as a residential system, strong institutional culture, and intensive language immersion. These characteristics create a conducive environment for sustained intercultural interaction and value internalization. As such, the findings reinforce the argument that pesantren have significant potential as models for integrating multicultural education and language learning in a holistic manner (Iqbal & Ridwan, 2025).

Figure 2. Conceptual Model of Language Festival-Based Multicultural Learning



However, this study also implies that the success of language festivals depends on institutional support, program design, and participant engagement. Without careful planning and alignment with educational objectives, such activities may remain merely ceremonial rather than transformative. Therefore, future research should explore the long-term impact of festival-based learning on students' intercultural competence and examine its scalability in different educational contexts.

Table 3. Key Features of Language Festival (100th Gontor Celebration)

Aspect	Description	Research Interpretation
Scope of Event	National-level Arabic and English Language Festival for Islamic girls' boarding schools	Represents a multicultural setting involving diverse regional and cultural backgrounds
Number of Institutions	44 participating Islamic boarding schools	Indicates broad cross-cultural interaction at a national scale
Participants	Female students aged 15–18 years	A critical developmental stage for intercultural communicative competence
Competition Types	Debate, Listening, Translation, Newscasting, Essay Writing, Storytelling, Public Speaking, Short Movie	Supports the development of multi-dimensional communication skills
Objectives	To enhance language proficiency, self-confidence, and intellectual contribution	Aligns with intercultural competence and experiential learning principles

Core Values	Integration of knowledge and character, communication skills, and global outlook	Reflects multicultural education within the pesantren context
Duration	October 7–10, 2025 (3 days)	Intensive interaction fostering intercultural engagement
Additional Programs	Muslim women intellectual seminar and language laboratory inauguration	Strengthens the institutional learning ecosystem

The empirical data from the language festival strengthens the argument that festival-based learning operates as a form of structured experiential learning rather than merely extracurricular activity. The participation of 44 pesantren demonstrates that the event creates a multicultural interaction space at a national level, which aligns with the principles of multicultural education proposed by Banks. In this context, diversity is not only acknowledged but actively engaged through collaborative and competitive activities.

Moreover, the diversity of competition categories—ranging from debate to short movie production reflects a holistic approach to developing intercultural communicative competence as conceptualized by Byram. These activities engage students in linguistic, cognitive, and cultural dimensions simultaneously, enabling them to construct meaning across languages and cultural contexts. This supports the notion that intercultural competence is best developed through authentic, interaction-based experiences rather than classroom instruction alone.

Importantly, the integration of values such as intellectual contribution, dakwah, and global awareness indicates that the festival embodies a contextualized model of multicultural education rooted in Islamic pedagogy. This finding extends previous studies by demonstrating that pesantren-based educational models can successfully integrate global competencies with local religious values.

Conclusion

This study concludes that language festivals function as a powerful integrative pedagogical model that simultaneously advances multicultural education and cross-cultural communication in Islamic boarding schools. The findings demonstrate that festival-based activities are not merely supplementary programs, but serve as meaningful learning spaces where students internalize multicultural values—such as tolerance, respect, and inclusivity—through authentic interaction. At the same time, these activities enhance students' intercultural communicative competence, as reflected in their ability to use Arabic and English contextually, negotiate meaning, and adapt to diverse social situations. In this sense, the language festival embodies a practical convergence between experiential learning, multilingual practice, and multicultural education.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of intercultural and multicultural education discourse by contextualizing global frameworks within the pesantren environment. The findings reinforce the relevance of Byram's Intercultural Communicative Competence (1997), particularly in highlighting how attitudes, skills, and critical awareness are cultivated through participatory and culturally embedded practices. Simultaneously, the study extends Banks' Multicultural Education Theory (2020) by demonstrating that its dimensions—such as content integration and equity pedagogy—can be operationalized effectively through event-based learning. Thus, this research offers a novel contribution by positioning language festivals as a concrete pedagogical bridge between language education and multicultural value formation.

Practically, the findings imply that Islamic boarding schools and similar educational institutions should strategically design and institutionalize language festivals as part of their curriculum innovation. Rather than treating such events as ceremonial or annual agendas, educators and administrators need to align festival activities with clear learning outcomes, particularly in fostering intercultural competence and inclusive values. Structured guidance, reflective evaluation, and sustained language immersion are essential to maximize the educational impact of these programs. In addition, teacher involvement and institutional support play a crucial role in ensuring that festival-based learning remains transformative, not merely performative.

Despite its contributions, this study is limited to a specific institutional context, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Future research is therefore recommended to explore longitudinal impacts of festival-based learning on students' intercultural development, as well as to examine its applicability across different educational settings and cultural contexts. Further studies may also integrate mixed-method approaches to provide more comprehensive evidence on the effectiveness of this model. By addressing these gaps, future research can strengthen the position of experiential and multicultural-based pedagogies in responding to the challenges of globalized and diverse educational landscapes.

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