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Between Informal Engagement and Classroom Passivity: Understanding EFL Investment in Indonesian Islamic Boarding Schools

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Abstract
This study explores the challenges influencing students' investment in Indonesian Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), and how students negotiate these challenges. Drawing on Darvin and Norton's (2015) model of investment, it examines qualitative data from focus group discussions with 29 students and semi-structured interviews with three English teachers from three *pesantren* schools in West Java. The findings reveal a discrepancy between learners' high informal engagement with English and their limited classroom participation, which cannot be explained simply by low motivation or limited proficiency. In this context, learners' investment is influenced by institutional regulations, pedagogical constraints, examination priorities, and moral discourses that frame English as both opportunity and ethical risk. Some cases show how learners may remain highly invested in English while strategically limiting their classroom participation when existing forms of engagement did not align with their aspirations or values. These cases suggest that classroom passivity may reflect a calculated negotiation rather than a lack of interest in the language. Theoretically, the findings add depth to existing investment theory by demonstrating how both teachers and learners in religious educational settings negotiate the perceived benefits of English against moral legitimacy. Pedagogically, the findings call for more dialogic approaches that recognise learners' informal English experiences while remaining respectful to the moral boundaries. While serving as pedagogical filters to ensure the propriety of learning content, EFL teachers can design low-stakes communicative activities that encourage active communication and reflection for critical language awareness.

Keywords: Language investment; Classroom passivity; Moral legitimacy; *Pesantren*; EFL learning

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INTRODUCTION

As Indonesia's oldest religious educational institutions, Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) are fundamentally designed to prioritize Islamic studies and to nurture moral discipline grounded in Islamic ethics. However, in response to globalization and state educational modernization, many *pesantren* schools began integrating the national curriculum into their education system from the 1970s onward. This transition encouraged *pesantren* schools to incorporate secular subjects, including English as a foreign language (EFL) into their curricula. The inclusion of English reflects a move toward fostering linguistic proficiency as a component of global competence alongside spiritual growth (Umar, 2022).

The transition of *pesantren* institutions toward the integration of EFL education also represents a

complex negotiation between global modernism and Islamic values. The English language is widely regarded as a crucial resource for higher education, social mobility, and global networking. Yet, it is also consistently evaluated against the institution's ethical framework and moral discipline. This condition makes *pesantren* a unique research site for examining how language proficiency is fostered within competing ideological discourses, where the acquisition of a global language must comply or align with the religious principles of the institutions.

Despite the institutional affirmation of English as a valuable skill, students' engagement with the language in *pesantren*'s EFL classrooms is often imbalanced or underwhelming (Farid & Lamb, 2020). During my preliminary observation in my fieldwork, many participants reported that while they actively used English for social media consumption and digital interaction during school vacations, they tended to be passive in English classrooms. This discrepancy creates a gap between formal instruction and real-world application. It also suggests that students' low level of classroom engagement should not be reductively attributed to a lack of individual motivation or low proficiency level.

Previous studies on EFL learning in Indonesian Islamic educational settings have focused on pedagogical, institutional, and learner-related factors affecting students' engagement with English, including large class sizes, limited instructional time, teacher-centred pedagogies, inadequate learning resources, limited parental support, socioeconomic constraints, and the challenges of navigating *pesantren*'s multilingual environment and dual curricula (Fajaryani et al., 2018; Habibi et al., 2016; Hidayati, 2016; Marzulina et al., 2021; Palmer & Chodidjah, 2012; Skourdoumbis & Madkur, 2020; Songbatumis, 2017).

Other studies have further investigated how religious beliefs and cultural values influence students' attitudes towards English. In some cases, these attitudes reflect learners' ambivalence towards the language. For example, Murtisari and Mali (2017) found that while some Islamic school students recognized English as a tool for global networking, they were also concerned about its potential threat to the Indonesian language and culture. Farid and Lamb (2020) further showed that conservative students tended to demonstrate less effort in learning English.

While the previous studies have brought attention to the reasons for students' disengagement from learning English in Islamic schooling contexts, they have yet to elaborate on factors that prevent students with a positive orientation towards English from engaging actively in a formal classroom environment. Prior explanations are framed in psychological terms, such as 'cognitive dissonance' (Farid & Lamb, 2020), which may overlook the broader ideological context that shapes legitimacy and participation in EFL classrooms. As such, the complex interrelation between educational, cultural, and moral expectations that may cause this particular condition still needs to be examined further.

To address this gap, the present study draws on Darvin and Norton's (2015) investment theory. According to this theory, language investment is shaped by the intersection of identity, ideology, and capital. Instead of viewing individual motivation as the sole factor that influences classroom participation, it highlights the relevance of broader factors such as legitimacy, power, and unequal distribution of symbolic resources that enable or constrain participation. Within this model, learners' investment in a language may be affected by their beliefs about the by-product of participation in learning. They may invest in language when they see participation as capable of providing valued identities, forms of capital, and future possibilities. Conversely, despite the high value of a particular language, learners' engagement may be strategically limited when opportunities for participation do not align with their desired identities or capital.

However, while Darvin and Norton's (2015) investment theory has explained how the interplay of identity, ideology, and capital shapes language learning, it sheds little light on how moral frameworks may affect the conditions under which investment becomes possible. Examining this aspect may extend the current understanding of investment by illuminating how institutional and individual moral considerations shape learners' participation in language learning and, in turn, their investment trajectories. Building on Darvin and Norton's (2015) conceptualization of ideology, this study uses the term *moral legitimacy*, a mechanism by which ideology translates into learners' participation and investment choices. It defines whether engagement in a language is recognized as ethically appropriate under certain moral

values, in addition to linguistic competence.

This study, therefore, argues that language investment should be examined beyond individual motivation or proficiency level. It considers how participation in language learning is also shaped by larger ideological, institutional, and social conditions that affect which forms of engagement are recognized as legitimate. The questions addressed in this study are as follows:

1. What challenges shape students' investment in English in Indonesian Islamic boarding schools?
2. How do students negotiate these challenges in their English learning practices?

By investigating these inquiries, the present study seeks to develop a nuanced understanding of how learners negotiate the conditions shaping their investment in English within religious educational contexts.

RESEARCH METHODS

This section explains the methodological procedures guiding the present study, including the research design, participant selection, data collection and analysis, and strategies used to maintain the credibility of the findings.

Research Design

This study used a qualitative multi-site case study design (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014) within a critical applied linguistic framework to examine how students at three Indonesian *pesantren* schools in West Java negotiated their investment in EFL. A case study approach was selected to examine language-learning practices in institutional settings where English is shaped by religious, pedagogical, and social expectations. The three *pesantren* schools (*Pesantren* A, B, and C) were purposively selected because they had similar institutional characteristics relevant to the study. All were located in the same urban satellite city area of West Java. They operated as residential Islamic boarding schools, implemented both national and religious *(diniyah)* curricula, and provided formal English instruction. They had similar student population size, language policies, and student demographic profiles. These commonalities allowed the study to analyze learners' investment within comparable educational contexts while minimizing institutional differences. Selection was further informed by institutional willingness to provide access for data collection.

Selected student narratives are considered embedded learner cases to illustrate differing patterns of language investment and disinvestment. This design is used to compare varying institutional contexts while making an effort to preserve focus on the individual learner's trajectories. The data analyzed in this article were drawn from a larger doctoral project that explored English learning, identity, and participation in religious educational contexts.

Research Target/Subject

The main participants of this study were 29 *pesantren* students aged 16–18 years old (14 males and 15 females) who participated in focus group discussions. Initially, ten students were recruited from each *pesantren*, but one student in *Pesantren* A did not show up due to health issues. Participants mostly came from lower-middle-income families and represented diverse ethnic backgrounds, including Betawi, Javanese, Sundanese, Batak, and Minang. All of them were multilingual, with Indonesian as their first language. Most of them had studied English for approximately seven to nine years, starting in elementary school. None of them had attended private English courses outside school. In the *pesantren* environment, both Arabic and English were spoken, although English was seldom used in daily interactions.

In addition, this study invited three EFL teachers, one from each *pesantren*, to participate in semi-structured interviews. They were the only teachers responsible for teaching the target student cohort in their respective institutions. They were believed to have full knowledge of students' classroom participation patterns and of institutional policies related to EFL instruction in their respective institutions.

Research Procedure

This study was conducted in several stages. The first stage informed the development of the research instruments and data collection procedures. Before the study's commencement, ethical approval was secured from the relevant institutional committee. Written informed consent was obtained from all adult participants. As for participants under 18 years old, written consent was obtained from their parents/guardians, along with their assent. Participants were informed of the study's objectives, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. To ensure confidentiality, participants' names were pseudonymized, and their identifying information was removed from all transcripts and reports.

Second, the focus group discussion (FGD) protocol was piloted with five students from a *pesantren* school not included in the study. They shared similar characteristics with the target participants. The pilot study ensured the clarity, relevance, and sequencing of the questions. Several modifications were made based on participants' feedback and the researcher's observation to improve clarity.

Third, student participants were selected purposively based on characteristics relevant to the research purpose (Patton, 2015). They were all full-time resident students who lived in the dorms and were selected to exemplify each variation in English proficiency (high, medium, and low) and classroom engagement levels (active, moderately engaged, and relatively passive). The EFL teachers initially made these categorizations based on their daily observations of students' classroom behavior and academic performance. Classroom engagement levels were determined based on teachers' observations of students' participation during lessons, including the frequency of students' questions and answers, willingness to use English, and involvement in class activities. Students were classified as active when they regularly participated in class, moderately engaged when they participated occasionally, and passive when they tended to remain silent or only participated when directly asked by the teacher. Students' English proficiency levels were identified using their grades in English from the previous semester. These classifications reflected teachers' perceptions of classroom engagement and were used for recruitment rather than fixed analytical categories. Indeed, some of the findings demonstrate that students perceived as less active in class may nevertheless demonstrate significant investment beyond the classroom. This sampling captured diverse patterns of EFL investment and participation across the three schools. The school coordinators and EFL teachers helped group these students by gender. Each focus group consisted of four to five students. The number of students was considered sufficient for the variety of perspectives and small enough for a conducive research environment (Krueger, 1994). Each FGD lasted between 45 and 60 minutes.

Fourth, a series of FGDs was conducted across three participating schools. This method allowed participants to share their opinions and experiences in a comfortable, peer-friendly environment that encouraged richer interaction and reflection. It also helped minimize ethical concerns about a female researcher conducting individual interviews with male students. Following the FGDs, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three EFL teachers, one from each *pesantren* school. These interviews provided institutional perspectives on the pedagogical and structural constraints that affect classroom participation. The responses from the FGDs and teacher interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission, subsequently transcribed verbatim, and translated into English for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) and critical discourse analysis (Gee, 2011). To improve the credibility of the findings, member checking was conducted after the initial analysis. Participants were invited to clarify or elaborate further on their responses where necessary.

Instruments and Data Collection Techniques

Data from the FGDs and the teacher interviews were collected between September 23 and October 8, 2022. While a protocol was prepared in advance, questions remained open-ended to allow participants to expand on their experiences and perspectives in detail (Leavy, 2017).

Originally, the larger study consisted of two rounds of FGDs, with the first focused on exploring participants' linguistic repertoires, language-use practices and preferences, and their perceptions of the multiple languages they used in their daily lives. In the second round, the focus shifted to their English

learning experiences, opportunities, and challenges in learning English; perceptions of English as a language; classroom participation; aspirations; and future plans. Since this article specifically examines learners' investment in English, only data from the second round of FGDs are reported.

Organized in a funnel format, the FGD questions progressed from broad to specific topics (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015) to ensure participants' comfort when discussing sensitive topics. In addition to direct questioning, enabling techniques were utilized to help participants express themselves (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015: 140). For example, word association was used to elicit students' impressions on English learning (e.g., 'When you hear the term English language, what are the first five things that come to mind?').

The FGDs were conducted in person to establish rapport with the participants and to examine non-verbal expressions to complete the data. They took place in an empty classroom to minimize interference and ensure the participants' privacy. Critical points that needed further elaboration were noted. Each session was closed with a summary of key points to ensure correct interpretations and to allow participants to expound as needed.

To ensure triangulation and incorporate institutional perspectives, semi-structured interviews with three EFL teachers from each *pesantren* school were conducted following the FGDs. Each interview lasted for approximately 30 minutes. The interview explored students' classroom participation, pedagogical practices, institutional expectations, and challenges in EFL teaching and learning within the *pesantren context.*

All FGDs and interviews were conducted in Indonesian to ensure participants' ability to express their views clearly without worrying about their English proficiency.

Data analysis technique

The data were analyzed using a recursive process that integrated reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) and critical discourse analysis (Gee, 2011). The thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing a final report. The analysis was done manually since the number of participants was relatively small.

Coding was initially conducted inductively to identify recurring patterns in participants' English learning experiences, participation, aspirations, and challenges. These patterns generated themes, such as informal engagement in English, pedagogical constraints, exam-oriented priorities, and moral-based consideration. These themes were then analyzed using Darvin and Norton's (2015) concepts of identity, ideology, and capital to understand how they reflected the broader process of language investment. The concept of identity helped analyze how students positioned themselves as English learners. The concept of capital was used to examine the value students attached to English. The concept of ideology helped analyze institutional, pedagogical, and moral discourses that shaped the legitimacy of participation. Table 1 illustrates this process.

Table 1. Codes, Themes, and Investment Concepts

Initial Codes	Theme	Investment Concept
Using English on social media platforms	Informal engagement	Capital
Textbook-oriented lessons; limited speaking opportunities; large class size; curriculum demand	Pedagogical constraints	Ideology
Preparing for university admission tests; focus on test performance	Exam-oriented priorities	Capital

Initial Codes	Theme	Investment Concept
Concerns about Western cultural infiltration; filtering cultural content	Moral-based consideration	Ideology
Positioning oneself as a devout Muslim learner; balancing religious and educational goals	Moral-based consideration	Identity

The selected student narratives were developed to illustrate contrasting trajectories of investment and disinvestment identified across the dataset. These cases were chosen because they exemplified the recurring patterns and different investment trajectories across different learning environments identified during thematic analysis. They were not chosen because they were representative categories of participants. This case-oriented approach is used to examine in depth how students' investments were shaped by institutional and ideological structures.

Reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process, following Braun and Clarke's (2019) thematic analysis approach. As a Muslim and *hijabi* researcher who was familiar with *pesantren* culture, I held a partial insider position, which facilitated rapport and encouraged participants to share their experiences openly. At the same time, I was aware that my shared cultural backgrounds could affect data interpretation. To address this issue, reflective memos were kept throughout data collection and analysis. To strengthen credibility, data from the student FGDs and teacher interviews were triangulated. An audit trail was compiled, including field notes, interview protocols, coding decisions, theme development, and analytical memos, to enhance transparency regarding how interpretations and findings evolved from the initial dataset.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis indicates that tensions between informal engagement and institutional expectations influence *pesantren* students' investment in EFL, to the point of affecting their participation. Despite many participants' favorable views of English's value as a global language and their active use of it outside the classroom, their formal participation was marked by uncertainty and strategic limitations.

Results

Across the data, four interrelated themes emerged regarding classroom legitimacy, pedagogical constraints, examination priorities, and moral-based negotiation. Each theme is elaborated in the following sub-sections with supporting excerpts from both the FGDs and teacher interviews to provide deeper contextual insights.

Informal English Practices and Classroom Passivity

According to Darvin and Norton (2015), as also evidenced in Lam's (2000) study, learners' digital spaces can become alternative sites for identity investment, offering symbolic capital and agency often unavailable in formal classrooms. However, in this study, pedagogical and ideological structures within the *pesantren* context severely limited the transformation of these informal investments into practical learning behaviours. Several students described their active engagement with English through digital media and online interactions, but this engagement did not translate into active participation in class. This indicates differing forms of legitimacy of their investment in the English language across formal and informal learning spaces.

Across the dataset, many participants stated that they actively used English in digital platforms outside school. Khalil's (17 years old, *Pesantren* A) narrative illustrates this broader pattern of informal engagement. During school vacations, he regularly used social media platforms such as Ome TV, where he could talk to foreigners about shared interests in English:

> "I often use Ome TV to talk to foreigners in English. Sometimes I ask where they are from, and sometimes we just talk about random things. It helps me practice speaking because I can use English more spontaneously."

Khalil explained that these digital interactions allowed him to learn real-life applications of English, unlike the mostly theoretical lessons at school. In online spaces, he could use English without reservations about grammatical corrections or pronunciation mistakes. These encounters fostered Khalil's confidence and sense of agency as a capable English user, independent of institutional supervision.

Meanwhile, according to Khalil, the English lessons at school were highly restrictive and repetitive in comparison. He explained that speaking activities were rare and most lessons focused on completing exercises from the student workbook.

> "Usually, we just answer questions from the workbook. Sometimes we read texts, but there is little chance to speak."

Consequently, Khalil's informal competencies were not acknowledged within classroom practices. Even when he sought additional learning opportunities through the English Club at school, the activities largely mirrored classroom routines, in which he was required to write a speech in Indonesian, translate it to English, then memorize and present it.

Rather than indicating low motivation, Khalil's limited participation in class reveals an incompatibility between his identity as an English speaker and the limited forms of participation deemed legitimate in the classroom. While digital spaces allow for broader forms of communicative experimentation, classroom practices are restricted to a controlled performance of language that values accuracy. Khalil's trajectories demonstrate the worth of informal communicative capital beyond institutional recognition, leading students to actively invest in using English outside the classroom while settling for passive participation within it. This reflects what Norton and Toohey (2011: 421, in Darvin & Norton, 2023) describe as 'disinvestment,' a phenomenon in which learners withdraw from classroom participation because the discourses available to them do not support their aspirations.

Khalil's case exemplifies a pattern among *pesantren* students in this study, who strongly preferred to actively engage with English through digital platforms while limiting their verbal participation in formal educational settings. Across various examples, informal digital practices granted them symbolic capital and communicative opportunities that were not available within the formal classroom context, which was shaped by institutional discipline and assessment demands. Consequently, the students' digital fluency existed in parallel with, rather than in congruence with, their formal English learning. Their investment was not lost, but it was transferred to spaces in which their participation felt more meaningful and therefore legitimate.

The discrepancy between the students' enthusiasm in digital spaces and their passive involvement in class indicates a context-dependent and discursively mediated investment. This finding highlights the significance of pedagogy, which will be discussed in the following section.

Pedagogical Constraints and Unequal Participation

Teacher interviews revealed that limited classroom participation was closely linked to pedagogical and structural constraints within the participating *pesantren* institutions. Across the three schools, English lessons were influenced by limited instructional time, curriculum demands, and the need to balance language teaching with religious subjects. These conditions emphasize teacher-centered instruction and often reduce the chances for meaningful communicative practice. The interviews also suggest that even when educators attempted to change their dynamics with students and adopt more communicative approaches, they were still constrained by systemic demands.

One teacher explained that classroom time was largely devoted to completing prescribed materials for the exam.

> "Of course, I want my students to be fluent in English. I know that ideally, they should practice conversation, but there is no time left. I should cover a lot of material in one meeting. (…) Our students also have to study religious subjects and do many rituals." (Teacher A)

Across the three schools, English is taught for only two hours per week. This prioritizes syllabus completion over communicative language practices and narrows the forms of linguistic capital valued in the classroom. Continuity in speaking activities becomes unsustainable under time constraints tied to textbook coverage, regardless of students' inclination toward verbal ability.

Similar concerns were expressed by the other teachers regarding class size and speaking opportunities for students:

> "I think, theoretically, teachers know that active learning is the best way to learn English, but in practice, it is difficult. There are twenty students in my class, so each has only one or two minutes to talk." (Teacher B).

Teacher's B comment underlines structural constraints on communicative practice. Even when teachers were aware of the importance of communicative language teaching, they found it difficult to provide students with opportunities to use the language actively.

As speaking opportunities become strictly limited, learners may find it hard to position themselves as legitimate English users within the classroom. These limitations reflected broader institutional pressures such as the demand for curriculum coverage and the need to balance English with religious studies. Teachers also had to navigate competing expectations and the boundaries of structural regulation. By reinforcing such standardized practice, they limit students' opportunities for active participation in the classroom. These conditions tended to position learners as passive recipients of knowledge rather than active language users, significantly reducing opportunities for meaningful language investment.

Moreover, while Teachers A and Teacher B highlighted structural constraints, Teacher C highlighted a more personal challenge related to confidence and linguistic legitimacy:

> "Teaching students to use English actively is important, especially because the world has become increasingly global. But I myself don't feel confident enough to teach speaking. I'm not a native speaker."

Teacher C's account reflects how native-speakerism (Holliday, 2006) undermined his confidence as a model of spoken English, despite his acknowledgment of the significance of communicative teaching practice. From an investment perspective, such perceptions are important because they shape the kinds of practices teachers feel comfortable and confident implementing in the classrooms. When even the teachers doubted their own linguistic legitimacy, opportunities for creating communicative language use may become even more limited, which in turn severely affects learners' participation. This suggests that the uneven distribution of symbolic capital also occurs among the teachers, as they inadvertently position themselves lower within the native-speaker hierarchy. This paradigm shapes the condition of the classroom in which language investment becomes possible.

Moreover, when teachers associated "good English" with "native-like" pronunciation, they tended to prioritize correction and controlled language performance over communicative interaction. Several students in the FGDs reported instances of heightened anxiety and discouragement due to frequent correction of pronunciation and grammar use. Often, they chose to stay quiet even though they wanted to speak up, afraid they might mispronounce a word or use incorrect grammar. This emphasis on correction-oriented pedagogy increases the perceived risk of participation by prioritizing linguistic accuracy over communicative meaning. From the perspective of language investment, students' silence in these

moments signals an attempt to avoid losing symbolic legitimacy as competent learners in front of their peers and teachers, rather than a lack of motivation.

These findings indicate that classroom participation is shaped by dominant pedagogical practices, institutional expectations, and access to opportunities for active and meaningful language use. Learners may choose to remain silent because they find participation socially and linguistically risky, not because they lack motivation in the language. The following section will examine how these dynamics are further amplified by exam-oriented forms of investment.

Exam-Oriented Investment and Selective Participation

The findings suggest that English learning in *pesantren* schools was often influenced by exam-oriented forms of investment, particularly because English proficiency was regarded as a gatekeeping mechanism for access to higher education under Indonesia's high-stakes university entrance system. This assessment regime positions grammar and reading as language elements with a higher exchange value than listening and speaking, which reflect communicative competencies. Thus, the forms of capital that learners prioritize become limited in scope.

Several participants explained that their main reason for learning English was to pass school examinations and gain admission to university. Ahsan's and Aisha's narratives illustrate this exam-oriented form of investment. Ahsan (17 years old, *Pesantren* B) was a high-achieving student who aspired to attend a state university through the achievement-based route (SNBP). He viewed English as a pathway to educational and social mobility:

> "I come from a poor family. College is expensive. If my school promotes me for the SNBP selection, that would be great. I heard that state universities will waive tuition fees. So, I study hard, especially for English tests."

Ahsan's narrative shows how English is associated with academic advancement. Coming from a lower-income family, he viewed success in English exams as a crucial pathway to admission to a state university and, eventually, to economic and social mobility. His investment was strongly instrumental, prioritizing examination success over communicative competence. For him, English served as a symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991) that could potentially be converted into educational and economic benefits.

A similar pragmatic orientation was echoed by Aisha (17 years old, *Pesantren* C):

> "Passing SNBP was not a choice for an average student like me. So, there was no choice but to prepare for the SNBT [state university's admission test]. My parents said I could only go to college if I got accepted at a state university."

Ahsan's and Aisha's accounts demonstrate how learners were encouraged to prioritize English skills that were most likely to be tested in examinations. Consequently, participation in communicative practices, such as speaking, was often perceived as less relevant than intensive, test-oriented practices. This contributes to selective forms of classroom engagement.

Another student, Zahra (17 years old, *Pesantren* C), demonstrated selective participation in a different way. She invested her time in note-taking and grammar memorization while avoiding English extracurricular activities and oral practices:

> "[The] teacher gives you *kisi-kisi* [material review for the exam], so I'll just stick with it."

Zahra's response shows a pragmatic investment choice that relied on facets of language competency legitimized in an exam-oriented ideological setting. Her decision to make this strategic engagement was

driven by compliance. Yet, outside the classroom, she engaged with English content creators and influencers on Instagram and TikTok, and occasionally wrote captions in English. These small acts of online authorship granted her a different sense of recognition compared to classroom-based participation.

Across these cases, English learning was valued mainly for examination success or access to higher education. The regulatory system that prioritizes measurable achievement over communicative use has restricted the forms of valued capital. This framework positions English as a gatekeeping tool and an ideological mechanism that rewards certain competencies over others. As seen in these cases, it led learners to prioritize specific skills that yield quantifiable results according to the system's metrics. In such contexts, disinvestment from communicative practices was not a reflection of learners' indifference but a form of recalibration toward institutionally valued competencies. Norton (2021) describes this phenomenon as *selective investment*, in which learners choose to engage in practices that yield tangible returns rather than in other forms with no such immediate results. Zahra's earlier statement regarding the following exam review materials reflects this utilitarian stance. Her strategic choice to adhere to the standardized learning materials illustrates how institutional ideology regulates investment by defining the legitimacy of valued competence. The exam-oriented mindset thus operates as a dominant ideological structure that keeps teachers and students in line.

These findings align with prior research on EFL learning in exam-driven contexts (Chang, 2016; McKay & Wang, 1996), where high-stakes testing narrows learners' investment to measurable skills. In the *pesantren* context, however, this instrumental orientation is further complicated by moral considerations, which will be discussed further in the next section.

Moral Boundaries and Negotiated Participation

This study shows that in the *pesantren* context, English is evaluated both for its educational value and its moral legitimacy. For this reason, investment in English becomes intertwined with religious identity and moral positioning. Many participants showed ambivalent attitudes in regarding English as a significant linguistic capital while associating it with undesirable Western values. Such perceptions illustrate how moral considerations mediated investment as learners negotiated their identities as both devout Muslim and successful English learners. Maulana's (17 years old, *Pesantren* C) account, for example, provides a vivid illustration of this ambivalence:

> "For me, English is just for studying, to understand the lesson and pass the exam, and that's enough. Maybe later for college or work. I'm afraid that if I learn English too deeply, I might be influenced by something *haram* [forbidden], like drinking or teenagers' free lifestyle. That's not good for Muslims."

Maulana's statement draws a strict ideological line between language as an academic resource and language as cultural exposure. His hesitation to engage extensively with English was not merely a matter of personal preference. It signaled an underlying broader discourse that framed certain cultural practices as possessing moral risk. For him, English was both an opportunity to obtain knowledge and a potential threat that posed the possibility of moral deviation. With his selective engagement, he attempted to reconcile his view of English with his moral self-positioning as a devout Muslim. His case illustrates calibrating investment in line with learners' religious identity and moral principles rather than complete withdrawal.

Teacher interviews supported this interpretation. Some teachers explained that cultural materials associated with Western countries were intentionally filtered:

> "As an Islamic institution, we are very sensitive about cultural topics. Even topics like music or hobbies can be problematic. When there was a unit about Western pop songs, I skipped it because I worried it might not align with Islamic principles." (Teacher A)

> "We have been advised to put Western cultures aside. It's not relevant for us in *pesantren* anyway." (Teacher C)

The teachers' comments show how institutional policies regulate the cultural content used in English teaching materials. Such filtering practices decide which forms of global knowledge are considered appropriate for English instruction. Consequently, learners' access to linguistic and cultural resources becomes regulated. Within this condition, institutional moral values seem to function alongside linguistic competence as an important marker of legitimacy.

These tensions further exhibit identity as a site of struggle (Norton Peirce, 1995) in which a student (Maulana) had to navigate overlapping positions as a devout Muslim and a successful language learner. His reluctance to actively participate in the classroom cannot be regarded merely as apathy; it must be seen as a discursively mediated negotiation between competing value systems. In this case, English becomes simultaneously a tool for empowerment and a morally regulated resource, with both forms carrying different facets of symbolic control.

These findings resonate with earlier research on language, religion, and ideology in Islamic educational settings (Chowdhury, 2019; Farid & Lamb, 2020; Sellami, 2006). In Indonesian *pesantren*, English emerged as a site where individual aspirations, institutional regulations, and religious identities intertwined. Investment is neither fully embraced nor rejected. Rather, it was continuously recalibrated to align with learners' religious identities and institutional moral framework.

Discussion

Across the findings, learners' participation in EFL classrooms was regulated by competing ideological discourses that define the legitimacy of English learning. Although learners actively used English in informal settings, their informal engagement often went unnoticed within formal learning contexts influenced by examination pressures, institutional demands, pedagogical constraints, and moral considerations. These discourses operated through what may be termed *moral legitimacy*, a mechanism through which ideology influences how, where, and why students chose to invest (or not to invest) in English. Moral legitimacy specifically defines which English practices and cultural content are considered acceptable within individual and institutional moral principles. Although English was acknowledged as valuable, learners and teachers distinguished between forms of participation considered beneficial and those perceived as carrying undesirable cultural influences in relation to Islamic principles. These findings extend Darvin and Norton's (2015) investment theory by demonstrating how ideological discourses are translated into everyday judgements about acceptable forms of language practice and investment in religious educational settings, as illustrated in Figure 1.

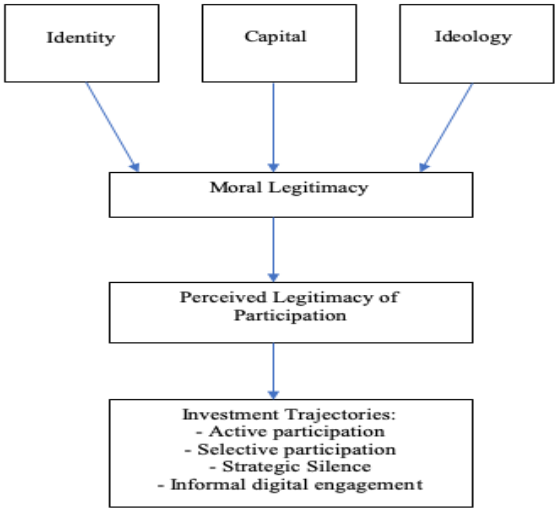

Figure 1. A contextual model of investment in *pesantren* settings

Figure 1 illustrates how the interplay of identity, capital, and ideology shapes learners' investment trajectories. In this process, moral legitimacy serves as a mechanism by which ideological discourses are expressed in evaluations of acceptable engagement. Depending on how certain English practices are perceived as legitimate within institutional and individual moral values, investment may take different trajectories, including active participation, selective participation, strategic silence, or informal digital practices.

In this sense, classroom passivity does not necessarily indicate disinvestment. Learners may navigate differing constructions of English as academic capital, social opportunity, and a morally regulated resource. Indeed, their passivity or silence may express a calculated negotiation of language use. When certain forms of language practice clash with institutional or personal moral frameworks, learners may choose to withdraw. Therefore, classroom participation and language investment are distinct and may diverge when learners seek alternative spaces for more meaningful language engagement.

Finally, the findings echo research supporting that digital spaces can serve as essential sites of language investment (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Lam, 2000). It is therefore important to examine learners' investment across different learning spaces, rather than limiting analysis to classroom engagement alone.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the challenges that shape students' investment in Indonesian *pesantren* schools and how they negotiated these challenges. The findings offer a new perspective on understanding classroom passivity as strategic and context-dependent rather than purely motivational. Although learners may appear disengaged in formal classrooms, they may remain highly invested in English by actively using it in other environments that align more closely with their identities and aspirations. Learners' participation is shaped by differing forms of legitimacy associated with institutional regulations, pedagogical constraints, examination priorities, and moral values that define legitimate English practices.

By examining English investment within religious educational settings, this study contributes to ongoing discussions of language investment. The findings demonstrate how individual and institutional moral considerations shape learners' investment trajectories. The findings also raise questions about how English curricula can align with institutional values and expectations without narrowing the scope of legitimate language learning. When English is framed primarily through the lens of exam success or moral caution, opportunities to foster meaningful communicative capability may be underutilized. Therefore, a dialogic pedagogy that acknowledges learners' informal English experiences while respecting institutional and individual values is important. Teachers may act as pedagogical filters by designing low-stakes communicative activities in which learners can share and reflect on their use of English in digital spaces. Such an approach can foster critical language awareness without compromising individual and institutional moral boundaries.

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