

Improving students' English language skills through English Camp method for 3 days at Pondok Pesantren Syafi'i Akrom Pekalongan

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Abstract

English language proficiency is one of the essential competencies that Islamic boarding school students (*pesantren*) should possess to meet the needs of global education and communication. However, English learning in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) still faces several challenges, such as limited understanding, limited opportunities for language practice, and a lack of confidence in communicating in English. The purpose of this community service activity was to improve the English skills of female students through a three-day English Camp programme at the Syafi'i Akrom Islamic Boarding School in Pekalongan. The activity was held from November 14–16, 2025, with 50 participants. The learning process includes several stages: preparation, implementation, and evaluation. The experiential learning and play-based learning approaches are implemented through activities such as vocabulary games, role-play, speaking practice, interactive quizzes, and motivational sessions for learning English. Evaluation is conducted through observation of participants' participation, learning motivation, speaking confidence, and vocabulary mastery. The results of the activities show increased participant engagement in learning, increased confidence in using English, and increased vocabulary mastery related to daily activities at the Islamic boarding school. In addition, this activity successfully strengthens collaboration between universities and Islamic boarding schools in developing language skills by creating an interactive, communicative, and enjoyable learning atmosphere. The English Camp programme has proven to be an effective learning alternative for improving teachers' English skills.

Keywords: English Camp; English learning; Islamic boarding school; speaking skills; students

INTRODUCTION

English is one of the international languages that is important in many areas, including education, technology, the economy, and international communication. English language proficiency is increasingly necessary to increase human productivity in the globalised world ([Nunan, 2015](#);

Widdowson, 1990). In this way, English language proficiency can be taught from the beginning of schooling in various educational institutions, both formal and informal.

In the context of non-formal education, pesantren not only serves as an organization that develops religious competencies, but also has the ability to return to the sanctuary with skills that are relevant to the advancement of time, such as foreign language proficiency. Pondok Pesantren Syafi'i Akrom Pekalongan is an Islamic educational institution that has a commitment to improving the quality of education to its students. Before the community service activities, preliminary investigation and interview with the boarding school administrators found that most of the female students have a strong interest in learning English. However, there are still many challenges such as limited vocabulary mastery, limited chances to practise English in daily communication and low self-confidence in speaking English. Self confidence is identified as an important factor affecting language learning achievement and speaking performance (Ghafar, 2021).

Apart from field observations, situational analysis was conducted through literature review in relation to English language learning at Islamic boarding schools. Some research has shown that the learning process of English in Islamic boarding schools often encounters problems such as limited exposure to English, the limited context that encourages the active use of English, and the dominance of teaching methods that still emphasise the understanding of theory rather than practicing communication (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Language acquisition is more successful when learners are given exposure to relevant and intelligible language input within supportive learning situations (Krashen, 1982). Therefore, students know the material given, but they have problems when they have to use the English language in the real life situations.

One way to tackle these problems is through the English Camp programme. This programme is designed to create a more communicative, interactive and enjoyable learning environment so that participants have the opportunity to use English directly in various activities (Basir, 2017). Experiential learning enables the learners to learn by doing learning activities (Kolb, 1984). It enables participants to experience, reflect, understand and apply in real life what they learn. Furthermore, the use of play-based learning methods can also increase the learning motivation and reduce the anxiety of the participants in the use of a foreign language (Harmer, 2015; Soro et al., 2023).

Previous studies have shown that English Camp activities improve students' learning motivation, speaking skills and communication skills, as they offer authentic, student-centered learning experiences. Participants can actively develop confidence in oral English through a supportive learning environment and the use of enjoyable activities (Brown, 2001; Larsen-Freeman, 2000). In addition, contextual learning activities can generate meaningful learning experiences because students are able to relate the learning materials to their everyday life (Gultom et al., 2025). Humanistic learning theory also stresses the necessity of establishing supportive learning settings for learners to feel confident, motivated, and to develop themselves (Yusuf et al., 2025). Therefore, English Camp is an alternative that is relevant to be implemented in the efforts to improve the English skills of students in Islamic boarding schools.

From these problems and situational analysis, the Community Service team from the English Language Education Study Programme of Sultan Agung Islamic University carried out a three-day English Camp at the Syafi'i Akrom Islamic Boarding School, Pekalongan. The activity was intended to enhance the English skills of female students, particularly vocabulary mastery, speaking skills, and learning motivation, through the use of experiential learning and play-based learning approaches. This programme is expected to be a good solution in creating a more active, communicative and sustainable English learning environment in the Islamic boarding school environment.

METHOD

The Community Service (PkM) was held on 14-16 November 2025 at the Syafi'i Akrom Islamic boarding school, Pekalongan, with 50 female students. The implementation method of the activity included three main stages: preparation, implementation, evaluation.

Preparation

The preparation phase started with a situational analysis to identify the needs and challenges of the partners. The data analysis was conducted through direct observation and interviews with the administrators of the Syafi'i Akrom Pekalongan Islamic Boarding School. The analysis revealed that female students were very interested in learning English but still faced difficulties such as limited vocabulary, limited opportunities for language practice and low confidence in communicating in English.

Based on this identification, the Community Service Programme (PKM) team designed an English Camp programme to create a communicative and interactive learning environment. In this phase also includes coordination with the Islamic boarding school regarding the activity schedule, participants, facilities and the development of learning materials. The materials prepared were basic English vocabulary, simple conversation, educational games, role plays and speaking practice based on the needs and characteristics of the participants.

Implementation

The programme was conducted over three days, using experiential and play-based learning. The learning activities were designed in a participatory way to involve the participants actively in each session. The material was provided by different activities that fostered the use of English in a fun context and lowered the language anxiety.

On the first day the programme was to introduce the basic vocabulary through educational games, vocabulary matching and interactive quizzes. The second day included speaking practice, group discussions and simple role-plays to build up participants' confidence in using English. The third day of the programme was filled with the deepening of the material, boosting motivation to learn English and practicing simple communication in daily activities in the environment of the Islamic boarding school.

Programme data were collected through participant observation, documentation of activities and recording of participant engagement in each learning session throughout the programme. The data obtained were the level of participants' participation, their enthusiasm to take part in the activities, their confidence to speak in English, and their ability to use the vocabulary they had learned.

Evaluation

The evaluation phase was conducted to find out the effectiveness of the English Camp programme toward the improvement of English skills of female students. Evaluation was done by observing the changes in the learning behaviour of participants before and after the programme. Measured factors were engagement in learning, motivation to learn English, confidence in speaking, mastery of vocabulary, and English use interactions during the programme.

Data obtained were analysed descriptively and qualitatively by comparing the conditions of the participants before and after participating in the programme. The results of the analysis were used to identify programme achievements, determine the impact of the programme on the participants and to form the basis for developing recommendations for developing similar programmes in the future. Furthermore, the results of the evaluation were also discussed with the management of the Islamic boarding school as input to support the sustainability of learning English at the Syafi'i Akrom Islamic Boarding School Pekalongan.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Implementation of the English Camp Programmeme

The Community Service Activity in the form of English Camp was held for three days, namely November 14-16, 2025 at the Syafi'i Akrom Pekalongan Islamic Boarding School, with 50 female students as participants. The programme is designed to improve the English skills of the participants through an experiential learning approach and play based learning. Learning activities are carried out in the form of educational games, speaking practice, role play, interactive quizzes, group discussion and motivational sessions for English learning.

The findings revealed that in the early stages of the activity, the female students were already interested in learning English, but faced challenges such as limited vocabulary, lack of exposure to language use in daily contexts, and low self-confidence to communicate directly. This condition implies the need for learning interventions that are applicable, communicative and able to develop the intrinsic motivation of the participants. The participants were introduced to some kinds of vocabulary introduction activities related to everyday life in the Islamic boarding school environment. The material was delivered interactively, so that the participants were active in each learning session. It was found that educational games helped to create a fun learning atmosphere and reduced the participants' anxiety in using English.



Figure 1. First Day of English Learning

The second day was for developing speaking abilities through role-play activities and brief chats. The team organised an English learning session centred on experiential and play-based learning. This strategy is used to create a relevant learning experiences, to lower the language anxiety and to help students acquire the vocabulary by doing activities that are related to their daily routines. Educational games, like word matching and easy role acting and interactive quizzes were introduced to enhance the involvement and attention of participants. Students responded well to the learning session and participated enthusiastically and exhibited more boldness in using new language. The reward method also helped to improve the motivation and learning dynamics.

The third day was dedicated to a session on improving the material and drive to learn English. At this point, the female pupils were more participative than the day before, which showed a greater comfort in utilising English. The materials discussed ways for learning English, the necessity of exposure to language and advice for strengthening autonomous speaking skills. The presentation of the content was to not only reinforce the principles but also to motivate the

insights in the context of Islamic boarding school education. The interaction between the presenters and the female students was vibrant, providing opportunities for the participants to pose questions, discuss and share their learning experiences.



Figure 2. English Learning Motivation Session

Evaluation Results

The activity was evaluated by participant observation for the whole programme. The observed aspects are participants' involvement, learning motivation, speaking skills, vocabulary knowledge and interactions using English.

Table 1. Observation Results of Changes in Participants' Conditions Before and After the Programme

Observed Aspects	Before the Programme	After the Programme
Participation in Learning Activities	Passive participation	Active participation
Speaking Confidence	Low confidence in speaking English	Increased confidence in speaking English
Vocabulary Mastery	Limited vocabulary knowledge	Improved vocabulary mastery
Learning Motivation	Moderate motivation	High motivation
English Language Interaction	Rarely interacted in English	More frequent interaction in English

From the observation in Table 1, all the things noticed have favourable modifications. Before the session, most of the participants were passive and did not have confidence to utilise English. After the English Camp programme, the participants were more actively involved in participating in activities, confidence to speak in front of their peers, and able to use the vocabulary taught in other learning activities. The participants' improved eagerness to study was also visible in their lively participation in educational games, interactive quizzes and speaking practice sessions. The participants were more involved in the process of learning and also more interested in studying English independently.

Discussions

The outcomes of the activity showed that the English Camp programme had a positive impact on the English skills of the female pupils. This is in line with Kolb's (1984) assertion that experiential

learning allows people to learn knowledge and skills through direct participation in learning activities. These experiences provide opportunities for learners to integrate what they have learned to real-world practice, therefore making the learning process more relevant. Moreover, play-based learning strategies have been proved to provide a pleasurable atmosphere for learning and lessen the nervousness of participants in utilising English. According to Harmer (2015) a supportive and participatory learning environment can boost students' enthusiasm and confidence in communicating in a foreign language.

The improved confidence of speaking among participants further confirms the findings of Brown (2001) that frequent practice of communication in a secure and supportive atmosphere can improve speaking skills and lessen anxiety of making mistakes. This activity helps them to practise English directly through games, group discussions and role-plays. It helps their communication abilities develop little by little. The programme's success can be seen from the participants' enhanced skills and the strong collaboration between the university and the Islamic boarding school. This relationship is an important feature in promoting the viability of English language learning programmes in Islamic boarding schools. Therefore, the English Camp activities can be recommended as an effective model of community service in enhancing students' English language abilities through an active, conversational and joyful learning style.

The increase of participants' vocabulary mastery can also be explained through Krashen's input hypothesis (1982) which states that language acquisition will occur when the input is understood and a little bit higher than the learner's level in a meaningful context. In this activity, the vocabulary was not taught through the rote memorisation but through games, quizzes and themes taken from the everyday life of the pesantren. This contextualisation was probably instrumental in retaining the new vocabulary, as the words could be linked to familiar situations right away, instead of being abstract items to be memorised. This finding corroborates the argument proposed by Gultom et al (2025) that contextual learning produces more meaningful results than decontextualised instruction as students are able to relate new material to the lived experience.

The reported increase in learning motivation over the three days also aligns with humanistic learning theory, which suggests that learners are more likely to engage and grow when they are in environments that affirm their feelings of safety, belonging, and self-worth (Yusuf et al., 2025). Several elements of the English Camp appeared to foster this type of environment: peer-based activities alleviated the stress of individual achievement, the playful format reframed errors as a normal aspect of the game not a failure, and the motivational session on the last day provided participants with an explicit, motivational story of the importance of continued English learning for them. These elements combined could be one explanation for why motivation of participants did not just stay the same, but rather seemed to gradually increase from the first to the third day, reflecting a cumulative rather than a one-off effect.

It is also important to note the particular importance of doing this kind of programme in a pesantren setting. Pesantren education is traditionally devoted to religious education and English is often regarded as a secondary subject with relatively limited classroom time and exposure (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). In this context, the intensive English Camp plays a compensatory role: it concentrates exposure and practice opportunities, which would be otherwise dispersed throughout a normal curriculum, in a short but immersive period. This suggests that the camp model might be particularly suitable for non-formal or pesantren-based educational settings, where the traditional weekly English lessons may not be adequate to build students' confidence and communicative competence.

The enhanced cooperation between the university and Islamic boarding school is another manifestation of the programme's success. Besides the direct learning outcomes of language, this

collaboration shows how community service activities can be a bridge between higher education institutions and non-formal education communities, providing pesantren access to pedagogical innovations that they may not be able to develop on their own (Basir, 2017). Such collaboration also benefits the university team by providing a real-world setting in which to test and refine their experiential and play-based teaching approaches with a population whose linguistic needs and learning context differ from that of conventional school students. Although these effects are promising, some limitations should be considered. Firstly, the evaluation was more qualitative than standardised pre- and post-test measurements. Therefore, the improvements in vocabulary mastery and speaking confidence reported were in line with observed behavioural changes, but they could not be quantified with precision. Second, three days is enough to get some short-term gains in engagement and confidence, but it may not be enough to sustain those gains without continued practice. If no follow-up reinforcement is provided, the improvements gained in camp may be lost when children return to their usual routine and decrease their exposure to English. Third, the programme's dependence on a small team of facilitators for a short time limits its scalability; replicating similar results with larger groups or longer programmes would require more facilitators, materials and planning.

These limitations suggest clear directions for future programmes. Structured pre- and post-tests combined with qualitative observation would provide a more rigorous measure of learning gains, and strengthen the evidence base for English Camp as an instructional model. A longer duration of the programme, or periodic follow-up sessions after the initial camp could help to sustain the motivation and confidence gains seen in this activity. Future iterations could also explore the possibility of tracking individual participants over a longer period to determine whether the increased tendency to use English persists in their daily interactions within the pesantren. This would provide more robust evidence of the programme's lasting impact beyond the immediate camp setting.

In conclusion, the results of this activity suggest that the activities of the English Camp can be recommended as an effective model of community service to improve the students' English language skills through an active, conversational, and joyful learning style, especially in pesantren and other non-formal educational institutions where opportunities to practise English authentically are otherwise limited.

CONCLUSION

The English Camp, a three-day Community Service Programme at the Syafi'i Akrom Islamic Boarding School in Pekalongan, effectively achieved its goal of strengthening the English abilities of female students in a communicative, interactive and fun way. The observations during the programme showed that there was a favourable effect on enhancing students' willingness to study, active involvement, confidence in speaking and mastery of English language. Experiential learning and play-based learning approaches through a variety of activities such as vocabulary games, interactive quizzes, role-play and speaking practice have been shown to be beneficial in creating a learning environment that facilitates more active use of English. The participants not only learnt new vocabulary but also showed more confidence in using English for easy conversation in daily life scenarios in the context of the Islamic boarding school.

The activity not only gave benefits to the participants, but also improved the partnership between the English linguistic Education Study Programme of Sultan Agung Islamic University and the Syafi'i Akrom Islamic Boarding School in Pekalongan in developing the students' linguistic competency. The success of the programme proves that English Camp can be an alternative effective English language learning model to be implemented in Islamic boarding schools. In the future development, the identical programmes can be executed sustainably with longer length and greater coverage especially in the speaking and everyday communication skills.

In addition, further community service activities might benefit from additional quantitative evaluation tools such as pre- and post-tests to better evaluate the programme's influence on participants' English language skills.

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