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Integrating English Language Proficiency and Islamic Competence to Enhance the Readiness of Prospective Islamic Early Childhood Educators: A Qualitative Study Within the SDG 4 Framework

***Mahi Sultan Salama*[1], *Joko Widodo*[2], *Rida Nurlatifasari*[3], *Kristiyuana*[4], *Esty Setyo Utaminingsih*[5]**

[1,2]Faculty of Education, Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang, Indonesia

[1,4]Islamic Early Childhood Study Program, Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Muhammadiyah Blora, Indonesia

[3]Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Duta Bangsa, Indonesia

[5]Primary Education, Post Graduate School, Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia

[1]mahi.sultan.s@gmail.com, [2]joko_w@umm.ac.id, [3]rida_nurlatifasari@udb.ac.id, [4]mischa.christy@gmail.com, [5]estys_utami@students.unnes.ac.id

Abstract

Objective: This study aims to analyze the role of integrating Islamic content in English learning to improve the readiness of prospective PIAUD teachers in accordance with the SDG 4 goals on quality education. **Theoretical framework:** The research is based on contextual learning theory and SDG 4, which emphasizes the importance of connecting learning materials with students' religious identities to improve global motivation and competence. **Literature review:** The literature shows that English as a global lingua franca is often considered less relevant in the Islamic educational environment, so the integration of Islamic values is necessary to increase motivation and engagement in learning. **Methods:** The research used a qualitative approach with a case study design on third-semester students of PIAUD STAI Muhammadiyah Blora. Data were obtained through interviews, observations, and documentation, and then analyzed using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña models. **Results:** The integration of Islamic content increases interest, participation, and relevance of English learning and strengthens vocabulary and reading mastery. However, speaking skills are still low due to anxiety and fear of making mistakes. **Implications:** This approach supports the readiness of prospective teachers by integrating English language competencies and Islamic values. However, additional strategies are needed to improve students' speaking skills. **Novelty:** The novelty of the research lies in the study of the integration of Islamic content in English learning to support the readiness of prospective PIAUD teachers within the framework of SDG 4, which is still rarely researched in the context of Islamic education.

Keywords: islamic-values-integration, early-childhood, elt, english proficiency, sdg 4.

INTRODUCTION

English has been widely recognized as a global lingua franca, dominating access to knowledge, technology, and international communication. In many countries, including Indonesia, English was taught from an early age as a second language because proficiency in English was considered essential for competing in the modern era [1]. Within the context

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of globalization, individuals, including university students in Islamic higher education, were expected to communicate in English. English proficiency also expanded students' opportunities to access scholarly literature and develop professional networks at the international level [2].

Islamic higher education institutions in Indonesia have acknowledged the importance of English and incorporated it into their curricula, although their primary emphasis remains on Islamic studies. For instance, the Islamic Religious Education program required first-year students to take English courses, aligning with the vision of producing graduates with global competitiveness while upholding Aswaja values [3]. Nevertheless, English instruction in Islamic universities had encountered distinctive challenges. Instructors faced a dual responsibility: to develop students' language skills while simultaneously integrating religious values, ensuring that learning materials remained relevant to students' Islamic contexts. In other words, English learning needed to be contextualized within Islamic traditions and values so that students could acquire a foreign language without feeling detached from their cultural-religious identity [4].

Although English courses were compulsory, the motivation and interest of some students in religion-based programs remained relatively low [5]. Many Islamic Early Childhood Education Programs assumed that Arabic proficiency was sufficient for prospective Islamic educators; consequently, English was not prioritized. However, empirical realities indicated that English proficiency had become a global standard for educators' competency [6], [7]. This low interest was often exacerbated by monotonous teaching methods or learning materials that were insufficiently connected to students' lives and needs, resulting in boredom and limited active participation in class [8]. Such patterns were evident, for instance, when English materials were delivered without familiar contexts; students tended to remain passive and perceived foreign-language learning as irrelevant to their discipline [9]. These conditions underscore the need for innovation in instructional strategies, making English more engaging and meaningful for students in Islamic Early Childhood Education Programs contexts [10].

One pedagogical innovation proposed to address this low interest was the integration of Islamic content into English language learning. This approach was grounded in the premise that materials aligned with learners' cultural and religious backgrounds would better capture their interest. Recent studies supported this rationale, reporting that embedding Islamic-oriented content in English instruction effectively increased students' learning motivation while strengthening character values [11]. For illustration, Anggaira (2024) reported that a digitally delivered English textbook enriched with Islamic literacy improved students' motivation and learning engagement because the materials were structured in accordance with their religious values [12]. Similarly, other studies have shown that using Islam-themed content through digital platforms (Islamic-themed YouTube videos) enhances students' enthusiasm and English skills more than conventional approaches [13]. The integration of religious values into foreign-language materials not only improved linguistic competence but also helped maintain students' Islamic identity during the learning process. In other words, this approach facilitated dual literacy, encompassing both language literacy and spiritual literacy, where English proficiency was developed in tandem with the internalization of moral and religious values [14].

Although the integration of Islamic values in English Language Teaching (ELT) had been discussed in several studies, its implementation in Islamic higher education contexts (such as Islamic Early Childhood Education Programs) had rarely been examined in depth. ELT in Islamic higher education was described as having distinctive characteristics that remained "underexplored" in the current literature. As a result, a research gap persisted regarding how such integrative strategies could be implemented and how they affected the learning motivation of prospective early childhood educators. This gap needed to be addressed promptly, given that English proficiency had become a standard competency for educators in the global era. Higher education institutions had anticipated this demand by

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making English a compulsory subject; therefore, identifying effective approaches to enhance students' interest in and English competence in Islamic Early Childhood Education Programs without undermining their Islamic identity was urgent.

Based on the urgency described above, this study aimed to qualitatively analyze the implementation of integrating Islamic content into English learning in the Islamic Early Childhood Education Programs program at Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Muhammadiyah Blora, as well as its impact on students' motivation and learning interest, a topic that had remained insufficiently documented in prior research. Scholarly, this study offered novelty by focusing on the Islamic Early Childhood Education Programs context through a qualitative approach, differing from earlier studies that generally centered on material development or quasi-experimental classroom interventions. By addressing this literature gap, the findings were expected to contribute meaningfully to the development of Islamic-oriented ELT theory and to provide practical recommendations for improving the quality of English instruction in Islamic education settings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous studies have consistently emphasized that English proficiency is an important competency for prospective teachers because it facilitates access to international educational resources, academic collaboration, and contemporary pedagogical innovations. In Islamic higher education, however, English learning is frequently regarded as secondary to religious subjects, reducing students' motivation and limiting active participation. To address this challenge, scholars have proposed integrating Islamic values into English instruction, enabling students to connect language learning with their religious identity and professional aspirations [14].

Contextual learning approaches have also demonstrated positive effects on learner engagement, vocabulary acquisition, and meaningful classroom interaction. Moreover, value-based education is considered essential for preparing future teachers who possess both academic competence and strong moral character. Despite these developments, research focusing specifically on prospective Islamic early childhood educators remains limited. Existing studies rarely examine how integrating Islamic content into English learning contributes to teacher readiness, particularly in balancing global communication skills with Islamic educational values. This gap highlights the need for further qualitative investigation in this field [14][15].

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach and Design

This study employed a qualitative approach [15], using a case study design [16]. The case study design was selected because the research aimed to examine a specific phenomenon in depth within a real-life, bounded context. In this study, the "case" was bound to the third-semester cohort of the Islamic Early Childhood Education Programs at the focal institution, including the interactions between students and lecturers in the English and Religious Education courses. This qualitative case study approach enabled an in-depth exploration of processes and meanings as experienced by participants, while taking into account multiple perspectives and contextual field-based evidence.

Participants

Participants were selected purposively based on their roles within the case context. The primary participant groups comprised: 1) Third-semester Islamic Early Childhood Education Programs students; 2) English course lecturer; 3) Religious Education lecturer.

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1. Third-semester Islamic Early Childhood Education Programs students: Students enrolled in the third semester of the Islamic Early Childhood Education Programs were included because their experiences and perceptions as learners provided insights into how English learning and Religious Education were enacted and experienced within the program. When the student cohort was large, an information-rich subset of students was selected to represent variation in learning engagement and language proficiency.
2. English course lecturer: The lecturer responsible for teaching English to third-semester Islamic Early Childhood Education Programs students served as a key informant to clarify instructional strategies, perceived student needs, curricular emphases, and the ways English content was delivered and contextualized within students' Islamic educational background.
3. Religious Education lecturer: The lecturer responsible for teaching Religious Education to the same student cohort provided perspectives on teaching religious values and content, as well as views on interactions between English learning and students' religious understanding (and vice versa).

The inclusion of these three participant categories was based on the assumption that each contributed complementary information about the phenomenon under investigation. This composition also supported data source triangulation to enhance the depth and credibility of the findings. Participation was obtained ethically, and all identities were protected through the use of initials or coded identifiers.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through three primary techniques: in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and document reviews. Employing multiple techniques was intended to generate a comprehensive account of the case and to facilitate triangulation.

1. In-depth interviews: Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with key participants. Interviews with the English lecturer and the Religious Education lecturer explored teaching methods, curricular implementation, instructional challenges, and their perspectives on the relationship between the two courses in supporting the development of competence in students of Islamic Early Childhood Education Programs. Interviews with selected students revealed their learning experiences, the challenges they encountered, and their responses to learning activities in both English and Religious Education. An interview guide was used to ensure coverage of core topics while allowing flexibility to pursue emergent issues. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.
2. Observation: Direct observations were conducted in relevant learning settings. The researcher observed English classes for the third-semester Islamic Early Childhood Education Programs cohort as well as Religious Education sessions attended by the same cohort. Observation was conducted as limited participant observation (i.e., the researcher attended as a passive observer) or as non-participant observation, focusing on lecturer–student interactions, instructional practices, student responses, and classroom dynamics. Detailed field notes were produced to document observed patterns and contextual features. Observation was used to capture naturally occurring behaviors and contextual elements that might not be fully articulated in interviews, and to corroborate the accounts provided in interviews.
3. Documentation: A documentation review was conducted by collecting and analyzing materials relevant to the case, including course syllabi and semester lesson plans (RPS) for English and Religious Education, teaching modules/materials, samples of student assignments, assessment artifacts, and program-level curriculum policies governing both courses. These documents provided contextual and factual evidence regarding

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intended learning outcomes, content coverage, and formal instructional expectations, which were compared with observed classroom practices and participants' accounts.

Data collection was conducted iteratively and concurrently. Preliminary insights from one technique were followed up and checked using other techniques (e.g., interview themes were examined through classroom observation and relevant documents), thereby strengthening the completeness and internal consistency of the case description. The researcher served as the primary instrument of data collection, requiring sustained attention to active listening, systematic observation, reflexive note-taking, and adaptive engagement in the field.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of qualitative findings, this study adopted the evaluative criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) [17]: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The following strategies were implemented:

1. Triangulation of data sources and methods: Findings were cross-checked across participant groups (students, English lecturer, Religious Education lecturer) and across techniques (interviews, observation, documentation). Convergence and complementarity across sources and methods were employed to minimize bias and enhance the credibility of interpretations.
2. Member checking: Interview summaries and/or preliminary interpretations were returned to relevant participants to confirm accuracy and to minimize misinterpretation. Participant feedback was incorporated when clarification, correction, or additional information was provided.
3. Prolonged engagement and persistent observation: The researcher conducted repeated observations across multiple occasions to identify stable patterns and to avoid overreliance on isolated events. Field notes and recordings were carefully reviewed to ensure the accurate capture of information and consistent interpretation.
4. Audit trail and peer debriefing: An audit trail was maintained to document key research decisions, raw data management, analytic steps, and reflective notes. Peer debriefing with colleagues or supervisors was used to challenge emerging interpretations, strengthen dependability, and confirmability.

Transferability was supported through rich, contextual descriptions of the case setting and participants, enabling readers to assess the applicability of findings to other contexts. Confirmability was reinforced by ensuring that conclusions were grounded in the data and could be traced through documented analytic procedures.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) [18], which involves iterative and interconnected cycles of: (1) data collection, (2) data condensation, (3) data display, and (4) conclusion drawing and verification.

1. Data collection: Data were gathered from interviews, observations, and documents, while analytic reflection occurred concurrently. Initial impressions, emerging patterns, and provisional analytic notes were recorded throughout the fieldwork process.
2. Data condensation: The researcher systematically selected, focused, simplified, and transformed raw data. Interview transcripts, field notes, and documents were read repeatedly and coded to identify meaningful segments relevant to the research questions. Codes were clustered into categories and themes (e.g., instructional strategies, language-related challenges, religious values, and points of integration), while redundant or irrelevant information was set aside.

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3. Data display: Condensed data were organized into structured displays to support interpretation, such as matrices, comparative tables, thematic charts, or coherent narrative summaries. These displays enabled the researcher to examine relationships across themes, compare perspectives between participant groups, and identify patterns of convergence or divergence.
4. Conclusion drawing and verification: Interpretive conclusions were developed based on recurring themes, relationships, and explanatory patterns identified in the displayed data. Conclusions were verified continuously by returning to the raw dataset, checking internal consistency, seeking disconfirming evidence, and corroborating claims through triangulated sources. Where evidence was insufficient, additional clarification was pursued through further field engagement within the study period.

Overall, analysis proceeded cyclically rather than linearly, with movement between condensation, display, and verification until the findings were robust, well-supported, and coherent.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures were conducted in accordance with the principles of qualitative research ethics. Participants provided informed consent, and confidentiality was ensured through anonymization. Data were reported accurately without fabrication or misrepresentation. The researcher maintained a reflexive stance throughout data collection and analysis to minimize bias and preserve the study's integrity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

English Proficiency Background and Improvement

Most students entered the Islamic Early Childhood Education Programs with a limited English background. Several had learned English only through school, with an emphasis on theory and memorization, leaving them with a weak foundation in practical skills, such as speaking and listening. One student admitted that before college, she did not understand English at all and was “very lazy to study it,” feeling she had no strong basis in the language. A few others, however, reported more positive prior experiences, for example, one student found learning English “enjoyable” in school and felt she had at least some basic foundation before entering the program.

By the third semester, the students generally observed some improvement in their English abilities. Many noted gains in vocabulary and understanding of basic sentence structures, which in turn increased their confidence compared to when they first enrolled. For instance, one participant who initially lacked confidence became more comfortable with basic English after exposure to simple vocabulary and felt “there was an improvement, especially in reading comprehension and the courage to try speaking” [19]. Another student explained that she had “started to enjoy learning English” with encouragement from friends and a supportive lecturer, and was gradually improving her pronunciation step by step. The English lecturer corroborated these perceptions, observing that by semester III, the students’ English proficiency was “quite good” for their level and had improved in all four skills, which contributed significantly to their preparedness as future educators. This progress included a better understanding of spoken and written English and increased ability to communicate, although there was still room for further development.

Strengths and Weaknesses in Language Skills

When assessing their own language skills, the majority of students identified reading as their strongest English skill and speaking as their weakest. They found that they could understand simple English texts (especially with the help of a dictionary) reasonably well,

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making reading a relative strength. In contrast, speaking in English was a struggle for many due to a lack of confidence and fear of making mistakes. Several admitted they were "not very confident speaking English in front of classmates," worrying about mispronunciations or incorrect grammar. Listening skills were moderate: students could follow slow, clear speech or children's videos, but had difficulty understanding fast conversations or speech with a lot of new vocabulary. Writing in English was also challenging for some; while they could write basic sentences or short instructions, they often felt confused about grammar and word choice when attempting longer reflections or paragraphs.

Notably, one or two students had a slightly different self-assessment. For example, a student mentioned that listening and reading were easier for her, and surprisingly rated writing as her weakest skill (she felt writing tasks were often done mechanically without full understanding). However, this was an exception [20]. Overall, speaking emerged as the most common area of weakness, cited by nearly all participants as something they needed to improve. This self-evaluation aligned with the English instructor's observations: according to the lecturer, students were relatively strong in reading and listening comprehension, but needed improvement in speaking and writing, particularly in achieving smooth oral fluency and constructing more complex sentences in written form. Thus, both students and their instructor agreed that productive skills (speaking, writing) lagged behind receptive skills (reading, listening) in the cohort.

Classroom Learning Experiences in the English Course

Students generally felt that the design of the English course in the Islamic Early Childhood Education Programs was appropriate and relevant to their needs as future early childhood teachers. The curriculum content focused on practical topics such as children's vocabulary, classroom instructions, and simple texts, which the students found useful. One student noted that the English course was "already quite good and relevant to the needs of prospective Early Childhood Education Programs teachers," since it covered the kind of language they would use with young children. However, some suggested that the course could be improved with more hands-on practice tailored to real classroom situations. For instance, incorporating additional simulations of teaching scenarios or more immersive activities was seen as a way to better prepare them for actual teaching demands.

In terms of classroom activities, interactive and practical exercises were reported to be the most helpful for building students' English skills. Nearly all participants praised role-playing activities, where they could act out teaching situations or conversations, as extremely effective. Through role-play (sometimes coupled with simple practice teaching), they could directly apply new vocabulary and phrases in context, which made learning more engaging and boosted their confidence [21]. As one student explained, these activities were effective because they were "contextual and increased confidence," allowing her to practice the kind of language she would use when teaching children. Another student similarly commented that role-plays were very useful since "we could express ideas, be more creative, and learn vocabulary properly" in a fun way. In addition to role-play, listening exercises (such as songs or videos) and group presentations were also mentioned as valuable, but it was the active, hands-on tasks that students found most revealing of their abilities and most beneficial for improvement.

Despite the generally positive learning experiences, students did face several challenges during the English course. A common difficulty was limited vocabulary; many students felt that their lack of vocabulary hindered their ability to fully understand the material or express themselves effectively in class. Along with this came a pronounced fear of making mistakes when speaking. Students often hesitated to speak up because they worried about mispronouncing words or using incorrect grammar in front of others. In some cases, the lecturer's fluency itself was intimidating: one student remarked that the instructor was "so proficient in English… I felt very inferior", which made her even more afraid of speaking and embarrassed by her errors. Another challenge was keeping up with the pace of

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instruction. If the lecturer spoke too quickly or introduced a large number of new terms at once, some students struggled to follow, becoming confused. These challenges sometimes led to feelings of anxiety or self-consciousness in the classroom. Nonetheless, students noted that being aware of these difficulties helped them identify areas for improvement (for example, practicing vocabulary more intensively or reminding themselves that making mistakes is a natural part of learning).

Regarding the course workload and duration, opinions were mixed. A few students believed that the allotted class hours (credit hours) for English were sufficient for improving their skills; for example, one student simply stated that the number of hours was "enough". However, several others felt that the standard schedule was not enough to significantly boost their proficiency [22]. They expressed a desire for additional practice time beyond the regular classes. One suggestion was to increase the amount of practical sessions or to provide supplementary tutoring/classes focused on conversation practice. These students felt that with extra guided practice, they could better reinforce what was taught and gain more confidence. In summary, while the English course was deemed relevant and moderately effective, students identified areas for improvement, including more intensive practice opportunities and support to address their speaking anxiety and vocabulary gaps.

Role of English Proficiency in Teacher Readiness

When reflecting on how English proficiency contributes to their readiness as future Islamic Early Childhood Education Programs teachers, the students acknowledged that English is one of several important competencies. In defining what it means to be "ready" as an Islamic Early Childhood Education Programs teacher, participants emphasized a combination of pedagogical skills, Islamic knowledge/character, communication abilities, and content knowledge, with English being part of the mix. They agreed that a truly prepared teacher of young children in an Islamic setting should be knowledgeable in early childhood pedagogy and Islamic values, able to communicate effectively, and also able to utilize English at a basic level for certain purposes. One student summarized that "everything is important and must be possessed" by an ideal teacher, from pedagogy and Islamic competence to communication and English.

In terms of the importance of English relative to other competencies, students' views varied in degree. Some consider English very important for an early childhood educator, especially in today's global era. For instance, one participant argued that English was "extremely important" because in the age of globalization, English has become crucial for children's development and growth. She felt that exposing children to English early would significantly benefit them, given its global prominence. On the other hand, many students placed English at a "moderately important" level, not the top priority, but still valuable. As one student explained, English was not as fundamental as pedagogical or Islamic competencies, "but it is still useful for enriching classroom activities, introducing simple vocabulary, and broadening the teacher's knowledge". In her view, English provided an additional asset that could enhance teaching, even if it wasn't the core skill. No students suggested that English was completely unimportant; even those who ranked it lower emphasized that it remained a beneficial skill to have as a teacher. The English lecturer concurred with the positive impact, noting that having adequate English skills allowed teachers to access modern educational literature and global resources, thereby improving the quality of teaching and learning in Early Childhood Education Programs.

Students envisioned using their English abilities in practical classroom scenarios in modest but meaningful ways. They did not intend to teach young children entirely in English, but rather to integrate simple English into daily activities. For example, many mentioned they would use basic English words and phrases for things like colors, numbers, greetings, and simple songs. One student imagined using English during circle time or play sessions to name colors or objects, or to say routine phrases like "good morning" or "thank you" alongside the equivalent Indonesian or Islamic greeting. These instances would

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naturally give children exposure to English. Importantly, the participants stressed that such use of English would be kept age-appropriate and aligned with Islamic values. They gave examples such as teaching a simple bilingual song titled "Thank You Allah" or using phrases that encourage good behavior (like "Let's tidy up" in English to reinforce cleanliness, an Islamic virtue). In all cases, the idea was to blend English into the classroom without undermining the Islamic atmosphere or confusing the children. Indonesian (and Arabic for religious terms) would remain the dominant language, but English could serve as a supportive tool to expand the children's experience. This balanced approach reflects the students' understanding that English can coexist with Islamic education goals, each reinforcing the other rather than being in conflict.

In discussing the benefits of English proficiency for their future work, students highlighted advantages for both their pupils and themselves as educators. From the children's perspective, having a teacher with some English ability could provide early exposure to a foreign language in a positive, age-suitable manner. The students believed that this would help children become accustomed to basic English vocabulary from an early age, increase their confidence in speaking or hearing a new language, and further develop their cognitive and linguistic abilities. One respondent noted that children would gain a "global perspective without leaving Islamic values behind," meaning they could learn about wider world concepts through English while still being grounded in a safe, Islamic learning environment. Thus, even in an Islamic Early Childhood Education setting, English was viewed as providing the children with an extra advantage, broadening their horizons and preparing them to engage with a global society in the future.

For the student teachers themselves, English proficiency was viewed as a valuable asset for professional development. They mentioned that knowing English would open up access to international educational literature and research, allowing them to learn from global best practices. It could also enable them to attend training or obtain certifications that require English, thereby improving their qualifications. Several students believed that being able to understand and use English would enable them to be more creative and resourceful teachers. For example, they could incorporate ideas from English-language teaching materials or collaborate with a broader network of educators. One student simply stated that a teacher who can use English has "more opportunities for training and becomes more creative in designing activities" for children. Additionally, in an increasingly competitive job market, strong English skills may give them a competitive edge. They believed it added to their professionalism and could be a "competitive value" that distinguished them as graduates of an Islamic Early Childhood Education program who are also globally aware educators. In summary, while English was not a central competency, such as content knowledge or Islamic character, it was clearly recognized as an important supporting skill that could enhance teaching activities, benefit children's learning experiences, and contribute to the teachers' own ongoing growth and effectiveness [23].

Self-Perceived Readiness and Needs for Improvement

At the end of the study, the participants were asked to evaluate how ready they felt to become Early Childhood Education Program teachers, specifically in terms of their English ability. Most students rated themselves as "fairly ready" but not completely. In other words, they believed they had a basic foundation that would allow them to use some English in teaching, yet they were aware that they still needed improvement before they could confidently call themselves fully ready. For instance, a typical response was that the student was "at a sufficient level of readiness, because I have the basic English fundamentals; however, I still need to improve my speaking fluency and confidence in using it in class". No student claimed to be "very ready" with English, and if anything, a few candidly admitted to feeling "not ready yet" due to their limited skills. Nonetheless, the dominant sentiment was this middle ground of "ready in basic terms, but needs more work," indicating a realistic self-appraisal of their English competence.

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The students openly identified several gaps in their current English skills that made them hesitate to consider themselves fully ready. The most frequently mentioned gap was, unsurprisingly, a lack of speaking confidence. Many felt that their pronunciation was not clear enough and that they could not express themselves spontaneously without hesitation. A limited vocabulary was another major gap, particularly in vocabulary related to early childhood contexts. They worried that their stock of words (for classroom objects, activities, or simple explanations) was insufficient to meet their day-to-day teaching needs. Additionally, students noted that they were not yet accustomed to consistently using English; it was one thing to perform in a practice scenario during a course, but another to integrate English regularly into the classroom. This lack of habitual use meant that using English did not come naturally to them yet. In short, the gap between their current ability and their ideal ability as teachers centered on speaking proficiency (fluency and pronunciation), breadth of vocabulary, and the ease of using English in real situations. These are precisely the areas they felt needed further development.

To address these gaps, the participants had already started considering or implementing various strategies for improvement. Several students had taken the initiative to practice on their own, for example, by using online videos or language-learning apps to improve their listening and speaking skills. Self-study was a common approach, with students trying to immerse themselves in English media or memorizing simple English expressions that would be useful for teaching young children. Beyond independent learning, many planned to engage in peer practice, such as regularly speaking English with friends or forming study groups to build confidence in conversation. One student mentioned that she wanted to practice speaking with friends often as a way to overcome her shyness. In addition, there was significant interest in formal or informal training opportunities. Students discussed enrolling in English courses or workshops outside of their regular curriculum, specifically those focusing on basic or conversational English, to systematically improve their language skills. For instance, a participant said she intended to "join a speaking class" to get guided practice in conversation. Collectively, these actions, self-study, peer practice, and attending extra courses, were viewed as crucial steps to advance their English proficiency closer to the ideal level they envisioned for a competent teacher.

Along with personal efforts, the students also emphasized the need for support from their college program to help them and future cohorts enhance their English proficiency for teacher readiness. They had concrete suggestions for what the campus or department could provide. The most commonly proposed supports included:

1. Special English training programs, such as short courses or workshops, focus on Early Childhood Education, teaching classroom English specifically tailored to young learners.
2. Practical English conversation classes sessions outside the normal curriculum, where students could practice speaking in an applied manner, building confidence through dialogues, role-plays, and other speaking drills.
3. Workshops on creating bilingual teaching materials, training on how to develop and use teaching media (songs, flashcards, games) that incorporate both English and Indonesian/Islamic content, so that teachers can confidently implement bilingual elements in an age-appropriate way.
4. Access to child-friendly English resources, such as additional English storybooks, flashcards, or modules suitable for Islamic preschool contexts, which student teachers can study and use for practice.

Such forms of support were deemed crucial in bridging the gap between merely learning English in a course and actually using English effectively as a teacher. The students believed that if the program offered these additional facilities and encouragement, it would greatly enhance their readiness. They would not only improve their language skills more

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quickly, but also learn how to integrate English into their teaching in a way that complements their role as Islamic Early Childhood Education Program teachers.

Overall, the findings indicate that the third-semester students in the Islamic Early Childhood Education Programs had made meaningful progress in English and recognized its value for their future careers. Their English proficiency, though still developing, contributed positively to their teacher readiness by equipping them with a tool to access knowledge and enrich their teaching practice. At the same time, they were well aware of their limitations and what needed improvement. Through personal initiative and hoped-for institutional support, these student teachers aimed to continue strengthening their English skills. In doing so, they aspired to enter the workforce as well-rounded educators, proficient in pedagogy and Islamic values first and foremost, but also capable of leveraging English to provide a quality, globally aware education to the young children under their care. The study's results thus portray a cohort that was moderately confident yet striving for growth, appreciative of what English could offer their profession while grounded in the primary competencies of their field. This balance of strengths and weaknesses, along with a proactive attitude toward improvement, was a key characteristic of their journey toward becoming effective Islamic early childhood educators.

Discussions

English Proficiency and Teacher Readiness

Participants' English proficiency was generally at an intermediate level: they were relatively strong in receptive skills (reading and listening) but weaker in productive skills (speaking and writing). This profile is consistent with patterns observed in other non-English-speaking teacher education contexts, where students often grasp passive language skills more readily than active usage. Notably, the candidates recognized that English ability contributed to their professional development, for example, by enabling access to global educational resources, modern pedagogical literature, and international communication. This perception aligns with the literature, which emphasizes that a teacher's command of English directly impacts their effectiveness in utilizing and imparting knowledge [24]. In line with these findings, a recent review highlighted that language proficiency is a fundamental component of teacher readiness, as it enables teachers to confidently integrate English content and methods into their teaching. Indeed, our English lecturer respondent observed that students with adequate English could tap into international curricula and media, thereby enriching classroom practice [25]. Such outcomes support the idea that English-proficient teachers can broaden their pedagogical horizons and adopt more innovative, globally informed teaching strategies, a benefit also noted in prior studies [26].

However, the participants in this study did not view English as the single most important competency; they ranked it as "quite important" but secondary to core pedagogical and Islamic competencies. This nuanced view suggests that while English is a valuable tool for enrichment, it is not seen as overriding foundational teaching skills and religious knowledge. Interestingly, this perspective contrasts somewhat with global educational trends that often place a heavy emphasis on early English acquisition. Globally, English is widely regarded as a lingua franca, and many education systems promote its early mastery as crucial for future success in a globalized job market. For instance, one international review noted that the introduction of English in primary education is driven by the growing demand for English proficiency in the workforce [27]. The fact that participants balanced the importance of English with other competencies may reflect the context of an Islamic institution, which prioritizes character and faith alongside academic skills. It underscores that, in this setting, English is embraced as an important asset expanding resources, communication, and "global" exposure; it is deliberately kept in harmony with local educational priorities [27]. This balanced approach is healthy, though it may suggest that

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additional motivation or support could further elevate English from "quite important" to fully integrated in their skill set. Given that English proficiency (along with intercultural experience) is a known driver of global competence [28], the program might consider strategies to strengthen active English usage (especially speaking and writing) without undermining other essential competencies.

Islamic Competence, Character Development, and Alignment with Literature

The study also found that these teacher candidates possessed a substantial level of Islamic competence, encompassing faith commitment, moral values, and basic religious knowledge, which positively influenced their readiness to be educators of character. Participants consistently reported habits such as regular worship (prayers), honesty in academic work, discipline in duties, respect toward peers and lecturers, and care for the environment, all rooted in Islamic teachings. This strong moral and spiritual grounding is crucial for early childhood educators in an Islamic setting, as it equips them to be role models and to instill good character in children. The importance of teachers' religious and ethical competence is well-documented in educational research. Teachers in Islamic schools often aspire to "affect hearts, nurture whole human beings, and grow spiritually" through their educational approach [29]. Describe how Islamic educators view their role as nurturing not only intellectual growth but also the moral and spiritual well-being of learners. These findings echo this aspiration: the candidates' sense of preparedness was strongly tied to their ability to embody Islamic virtues (such as honesty, responsibility, and kindness) in the classroom. They perceived that being a morally upright role model is an integral part of "readiness" to teach in an Islamic early childhood context, just as much as lesson planning or content knowledge. This perspective is consistent with the notion that in values-based education systems, a teacher's character and faith commitment are paramount competencies.

At the same time, the modern educational environment can pose challenges to maintaining these ideals. There is potential tension between the holistic, faith-oriented vision of education and the pressures of standardization and accountability in a globalized era. As noted in a recent international publication, Islamic educators often experience a "moral dissonance" in reconciling their spiritual educational goals with the neoliberal, efficiency-driven reforms prevalent in global education. Such reforms tend to narrow the definition of learning to what is measurable, whereas Islamic education places emphasis on spiritual and moral dimensions that are less tangible [30]. Despite this general tension, this study suggests that the participants felt supported in their environment to uphold their values. The institution (an Islamic college) likely provides a culture that validates religious expressions within professional training, for example, integrating character education in coursework and encouraging reflective practices. Indeed, the candidates reported that various courses and campus activities (not only Islamic studies classes but also others, such as English or pedagogy) reinforced their Islamic outlook and character. This integrated experience may help alleviate the dissonance by showing that one can be both a competent modern teacher and a devout, ethical role model. The literature affirms that such integration is not only possible but necessary: education scholars have issued renewed calls for teacher preparation programs that are grounded in an Islamic paradigm while remaining conversant with contemporary educational demands [31]. In other words, rather than treating religious values and modern skills as separate (or conflicting) domains, the aim is to produce educators who excel in both [32]. Participants' strong Islamic competence, coupled with their engagement in professional coursework, reflects this kind of dual development. It is worth noting, however, that a few participants acknowledged gaps in their religious knowledge, particularly those who did not have a strong background in Islamic studies before college. This suggests a need for ongoing support to deepen certain aspects of their Islamic competence (for example, more advanced Islamic pedagogy or theology) as they approach graduation. Overall, the high value placed on faith and character in these findings

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aligns with the ethos of Islamic teacher education as found in the literature, where cultivating the "soul" of the teacher is as important as developing technical skills.

Integrating English (Global Skill) and Islamic Values: Synergy and Tensions

A critical aspect of this study was the integration of English language proficiency (as a global skill) with Islamic values in the teacher education curriculum. Both faculty and students reported that this integration has been pursued actively in their program, for instance, through English lessons that incorporate Islamic themes, collaborative efforts between English and Islamic studies lecturers to design bilingual learning materials with moral content, and the use of English resources (articles, videos) on Islamic topics. The results indicate that such integration is not only feasible but beneficial. The dual competency profile of an educator who is proficient in a global language and grounded in Islamic ethics was seen as ideal for graduates who will teach in an increasingly globalized society, without losing their cultural and religious identity. Participants believed that mastering English opens doors to broader knowledge and communication, while Islamic values ensure that they use that knowledge responsibly and impart it in line with moral principles [33]. This finding aligns strongly with international discussions on education for global citizenship in religious contexts. For example, a study of an international school in Qatar found considerable overlap between global citizenship education (as encouraged by SDG Target 4.7) and Islamic values in practice. In that case, educators navigated the intersections of the International Baccalaureate's global-minded curriculum and the Islamic traditions of the local context. The researcher noted both convergence and divergence areas where Islamic values and global citizenship ideals reinforce each other, and areas where they differ, but importantly, the school was able to conflate the two in daily rituals and curricula, effectively "fusing Islamic values with global citizenship" [34].

The study mirrors those observations. On the one hand, participants observed a clear synergy: English was regarded as a neutral tool that can even enhance one's understanding of Islam (by accessing Islamic knowledge in English or communicating Islamic ideas globally), rather than a threat. The Lecturer of Islamic Studies insightfully noted that English provides access to contemporary Islamic scholarship and educational innovations worldwide, for example, English translations of Quranic interpretations or international forums on Islamic early childhood education, thereby enriching the candidates' religious and professional knowledge base. This perspective supports the idea that global competencies (like English and intercultural knowledge) can strengthen, not weaken, one's religious educational practice. It echoes the principle often cited by Islamic scholars: 'take the good and leave the bad, meaning one can absorb beneficial knowledge from global sources while filtering out elements that conflict with core values. Participants acknowledged that Western-origin content could carry values less aligned with Islam, but they believed these could be mitigated with a strong ethical filter. This cautious yet open approach is prudent and reflects what Gamal (2020) described as educators making "adaptations" to global content to fit Islamic norms while addressing inherent "tensions" [35]. In this context, those tensions appeared minimal; neither students nor lecturers perceived English or global content as a serious threat, likely because the program consistently frames English within an Islamic paradigm (using morally appropriate materials, emphasizing that learning English is also a means for dakwah or spreading goodness).

On the other hand, the integration in this case also faced practical challenges, which are instructive. For instance, ensuring that all English teaching materials align with Islamic values requires ongoing effort and coordination. The English lecturer had taken the initiative to include Islamic-themed texts and discussions, and the Islamic Studies lecturer had occasionally collaborated in planning, yet these efforts depended partly on personal initiative. A more systematic curriculum design could further strengthen integration. This recommendation is supported by current educational scholarship. Experts argue that teacher

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education curricula in the Islamic world should explicitly weave together global skill development with religious education, to "redress bifurcation" (the split between secular and religious training). By doing so, programs can produce teachers who are confident in their faith identity and simultaneously adept in modern competencies. The outcome is a holistic teacher capable of delivering quality education, which resonates with the broader aims of SDG 4 (ensuring inclusive, equitable, quality education for all). In fact, participants' vision of an ideal early childhood teacher was precisely someone who was both religiously devout and globally informed. Many students mentioned that having English ability would allow them to introduce young children to basic global knowledge (simple English words, multicultural concepts) in an "Islamically safe" way, thereby giving the children a broadened worldview from an early age. This approach contributes to what the OECD and others term' global competence ' among learners, without compromising local values. Developing such globally competent educators is increasingly seen as a key to preparing the next generation for the global era. Notably, global competence frameworks emphasize not only language skills but also an understanding of other cultures and openness to diversity [36]. The integrative experiences reported in this study (such as discussions on Islamic ethics in English, or reflecting on global issues through an Islamic lens) likely fostered exactly these attributes in the teacher candidates. Overall, the integration of English and Islamic values in this program appears to be a forward-thinking practice, aligning well with international calls to produce educators who can bridge local and global contexts in their teaching [37]. With careful curriculum planning and inter-departmental collaboration, any potential value clashes can be mitigated, and the full benefits of this integration can be realized. This finding contributes to the narrative that global competence and religious identity need not be at odds with thoughtful integration, they can indeed reinforce each other in the making of well-rounded teachers.

Recommendations and Areas for Improvement

While the overall outcomes are positive, the study did identify some gaps and challenges that warrant attention. Firstly, the English-speaking and writing skills of the candidates remain an area for improvement. Many students admitted to a lack of confidence in speaking English fluently and in composing more complex written texts. Since the effective teaching of English (even basic phrases to children) requires a certain level of fluency and spontaneity, it is recommended that the program incorporate more practice-oriented language training. This could include conversation workshops, micro-teaching sessions in English, or an increased use of interactive activities, such as role-plays and presentations, in the English course. By creating a low-stakes environment for practicing speaking, students can overcome their fear of mistakes and improve their communicative competence. Research supports this approach: a thematic review of teacher readiness for English teaching noted that ongoing practice and confidence-building are critical, and it highlighted the importance of continuous professional development to enhance language and pedagogical skills. In addition, institutional support (language labs, access to English media, or extracurricular English clubs) could be provided to give students more exposure [38]. Strengthening these areas is essential, as experts have warned that without sufficient training and support, teachers may struggle to deliver quality English instruction. Participants' cases are not unique; many pre-service teachers globally face similar hurdles, and the remedy lies in sustained skills development backed by faculty guidance [39].

Secondly, in terms of Islamic competence, most students were confident, but a few signaled that they needed deeper knowledge in certain areas (for instance, Islamic jurisprudence relevant to childcare, or more familiarity with prophetic stories to share with kids). To address this, the department could consider supplementary workshops or mentoring. Pairing students with particularly strong backgrounds in Islamic studies with those who feel less prepared may encourage peer learning (for example, study circles or group discussions on Islamic content in ECE). Additionally, inviting experienced Islamic education practitioners as guest speakers could inspire the students and give practical

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insights on embodying Islamic values in teaching. Such measures would reinforce what is already a strength (their character and faith) and ensure no student feels unsure about any aspect of their role as a moral guide [40]. This aligns with the broader educational need to continuously nurture the values and attitudes of teachers, as well as their academic skills. Given that participants identified "being a good role model" as crucial, any support that helps them internalize and exemplify Islamic virtues more profoundly will directly boost their readiness [41].

Another area for improvement involves professional skills and dispositions, such as time management, responsibility, and adaptability. A few lecturers noted instances of students arriving late, submitting assignments after deadlines, or demonstrating limited initiative. These habits, if carried into the workplace, could affect their effectiveness. It would be beneficial for the program to emphasize professional ethics and self-management strategies. This might be done by integrating such soft-skill training into existing courses (setting stricter enforcement of deadlines to build discipline, or reflective assignments on professional conduct). Internationally, teacher readiness is said to be influenced not only by knowledge and skills but also by attitudes and beliefs [42]. Ensuring that graduates have a strong sense of duty and work ethic is as important as their academic preparation. Encouraging a growth mindset and responsibility can be part of mentoring by faculty advisors; for instance, faculty could provide feedback on professionalism during teaching practicums or campus activities. Over time, cultivating these professional dispositions will contribute to the candidates' overall competence and reliability as educators.

Finally, to further enhance the global competence aspect of the program, it would be advantageous to increase opportunities for cross-cultural engagement. While the current curriculum already introduces some global content via English, the college could expand this by, for example, organizing virtual exchange sessions with early childhood education students or practitioners in other countries. Research suggests that interactions with people from different cultural backgrounds, even through online collaboration, can significantly broaden teachers' perspectives and global awareness. In this study, students who had more exposure (through the internet or personal interest) to global ideas tended to value English and global knowledge more. Thus, structured exposure, such as an online joint class with a partner institution abroad or inviting international experts for webinars, could reinforce their global outlook. This initiative aligns with global education trends and complements the SDG 4.7 objective of promoting global citizenship skills [43]. Moreover, it complements the program's Islamic framework: students can learn how Islamic educational values are practiced in other countries, which can strengthen their own pedagogical approach (for instance, learning about Islamic preschools in other parts of the world through English communication). By implementing these improvements, intensified language practice, deeper Islamic content support, professional skill development, and expanded global engagement, the program can better prepare its graduates. Ultimately, the goal is to produce globally competent educators with strong character, and these suggestions are geared towards that aim. They are consistent with international recommendations that call for comprehensive teacher training and continuous development to build teacher capacity in all relevant dimensions. With these enhancements, future cohorts of teacher candidates will be even more equipped to provide high-quality early childhood education that meets both local needs and global standards.

CONCLUSION

This study concluded that integrating Islamic content into English learning strengthened the readiness of prospective Islamic early childhood teachers by making English instruction more meaningful, identity-aligned, and supportive of SDG 4 quality education goals. The integration increased students' motivation and engagement, and it contributed to observable progress, particularly in vocabulary and reading comprehension. However, speaking remained the most challenging skill, as many students still experienced low confidence and

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a fear of errors. The findings indicated that English was perceived not as a competing priority, but as a supportive competence that broadened access to global pedagogical resources and helped future teachers enrich age-appropriate classroom activities without weakening Islamic character. Therefore, sustained collaboration between English and Religious Education lecturers, along with more structured opportunities for speaking practice, was recommended to balance receptive and productive skills and further improve graduates' overall professional preparedness.

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Author Contribution

Mahi Sultan Salama: conceptualization, methodology, data collection, formal analysis, writing original draft. Joko Widodo: supervision, validation, writing, review, and editing. All authors approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

All authors declare no conflict of interest.

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