



EMPOWERING STUDENTS' ENGLISH COMMUNICATION SKILLS THROUGH PARTICIPATORY LEARNING IN PESANTREN

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Abstrak

Program pengabdian kepada masyarakat ini bertujuan untuk meningkatkan keterampilan berbicara bahasa Inggris santri Pondok Pesantren Tahfidzul Qur'an Al-Quds di Bandar Lampung melalui pendekatan Participatory Action Research (PAR). Program ini dilaksanakan selama tiga bulan dalam tiga siklus tindakan: Look, Think, dan Act, dengan partisipasi aktif santri dan pengurus dalam seluruh tahapan. Pembelajaran dilakukan menggunakan materi kontekstual berbasis aktivitas keseharian santri di pesantren seperti ibadah, interaksi di asrama, dan diskusi nilai-nilai Islam. Hasil evaluasi menunjukkan peningkatan rerata skor sebesar 17.2 poin antara pre-test dan post-test, serta munculnya perubahan afektif seperti meningkatnya rasa percaya diri dan partisipasi aktif. Wawancara dan refleksi menunjukkan kebermanfaatan nyata, seperti terbentuknya mentor sebaya dan atmosfer belajar yang lebih terbuka. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa pembelajaran berbasis konteks religius yang partisipatif mampu meningkatkan keterampilan komunikasi santri secara bermakna dan berkelanjutan.

Kata kunci: Keterampilan Berbicara, PAR, Pembelajaran Partisipatif, Pengabdian Masyarakat, Pesantren.

Abstract

This community service program aimed to enhance the English-speaking skills of students at Pondok Pesantren Tahfidzul Qur'an Al-Quds in Bandar Lampung through a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach. Implemented over three months in three action cycles: Look, Think, and Act, the program involved students and pesantren administrators in all phases of contextual, theme-based learning drawn from students' daily activities such as prayer routines, dormitory interactions, and Islamic value discussions. Evaluation results revealed a 17.2-point average increase between pre-test and post-test scores, alongside affective improvements such as confidence and active participation. Interviews and reflection sessions indicated tangible benefits, including the emergence of peer mentors and an engaging learning atmosphere. These findings affirm that integrating participatory methods with religious and contextual content meaningfully supports students' speaking skill development in pesantren settings.

Keywords: Community Service, Islamic Boarding School, PAR, Participatory Learning, Speaking Skills.

INTRODUCTION

Islamic boarding schools are community-based Islamic educational institutions that play an important role in forming a generation of moral and knowledgeable people. Harmer (2015) states that English language skills are an important prerequisite in facing the global challenges of the 21st century. In the context of Islamic boarding schools, Sari et al. (2023) emphasized that English is also needed to support the role of students as agents of cross-cultural and scientific *da'wah*.

However, English learning in Islamic boarding schools still faces a number of specific challenges. Burns (2010) criticizes that non-contextual teaching methods can reduce the effectiveness of learning. Gunawan and Rahmah (2019) found that theoretical learning often makes it difficult for students to apply English in their real lives. In addition, Rukmana et al. (2023) highlight the lack of teaching media that is relevant to Islamic values and local culture. In designing learning, this program refers to the theory of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which emphasizes the use of language as a means of meaningful communication in a social context (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). To develop students' speaking skills, activities are designed based on a comprehensible input approach, as reexplained and contextualized by Bailey and Fahad (2021) in their review of Krashen's theory. In addition, the principle of pushed output, as explained by Swain (2005) is also used, which encourages participants to produce language actively and in a directed manner.

This approach emphasizes the role of social interaction in language development (Lantolf & Poehner, 2014). In this case, collaborative learning in the dormitory environment and learning groups support the learning process in the proximal development zone of students (Qasserras, 2023). The program also adapts the principles of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), which emphasizes real-life communicative tasks such as describing worship activities, interacting in simulations of *pesantren* guests, and discussing Islamic values in English (Nunan, 2010). Thus, the daily activities of students are not only the background, but also an active medium for authentic and contextual language learning.

The approach that is considered relevant to answer this challenge is Participatory Action Research (PAR). Kemmis et al. (2014) stated that PAR encourages active participation of participants in the entire learning process. Fikri (2018) proves Community involvement in designing and evaluating learning can increase motivation and meaningfulness of learning. Rosyada and Ramadhianti (2021) also support this approach by emphasizing the need to integrate local and cultural values in the process of learning foreign languages in the *pesantren* environment.

However, there are not many community service programs that systematically integrate the PAR approach with the typical religious context of



Islamic boarding schools (Millah, 2019). Most of the English language training is still carried out top-down, without considering the daily life of the students (Nurtresnaningsih, 2018) (Ratnasari, 2016). The novelty of this program lies in the learning design that incorporates typical Islamic boarding school activities such as daily worship, interaction in the dormitory, and discussion of Islamic values into English learning. This approach adapts learning to the local culture and encourages the formation of a sense of belonging in the pesantren community to the educational process undertaken.

Based on these conditions, this service program aims to improve students' English speaking skills through participatory contextual learning. Students' English speaking skills include improving mastery of the thematic vocabulary of the Islamic boarding school, fostering confidence in oral communication, creating collaborative learning spaces that suit the character of the students, and forming local leaders among students to support the sustainability of learning.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This community service program uses the Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach (Stringer, 2014), which is a collaborative method that emphasizes the active participation of assisted subjects in each stage of activities (Kemmis et al., 2014). This approach is considered effective to build close involvement between the implementation team and the pesantren community, so that the program becomes more responsive to local needs and able to produce sustainable change (Robingatun et al., 2024).

The subjects of the service were 15 male students aged between 15 and 20 years old from the Tahfidzul Qur'an Al-Quds Islamic Boarding School, Bandar Lampung. The majority of students have religious education backgrounds and show limitations in mastery of English, especially in the aspects of grammar, vocabulary, and conversation. This program was carried out for three months, from March to May 2024, located in the pesantren environment located in Bandar Lampung and divided into three action cycles that follow the PAR model based on Stringer (2014), namely: (1) Look which is the identification of learning problems and needs; (2) Think in the form of planning and preparation of thematic learning materials for Islamic boarding schools; (3) Act in the form of the implementation of learning as well as continuous reflection and evaluation. The flow of PAR activities in this service is described in Figure 1.

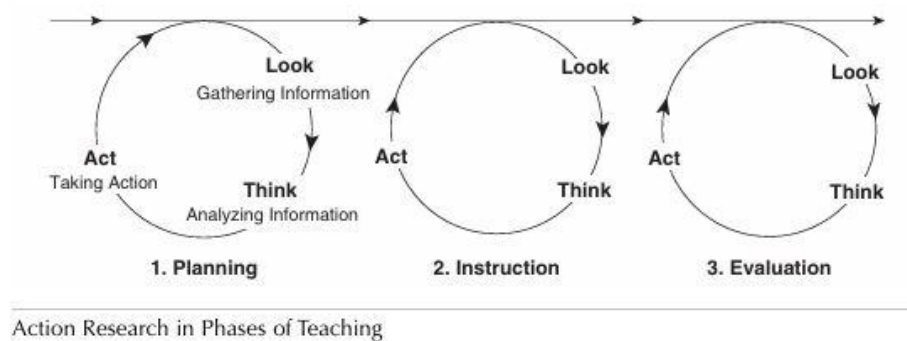


Figure 1. PAR Implementation Flow Diagram

In the planning stage, the service team involves students and administrators to identify needs, select materials, and determine learning strategies. The organizing stage is carried out by forming a study group based on the level of ability of the students to maximize the effectiveness of learning. The implementation stage is focused on interactive methods that follow the learning styles of the digital generation students (Raharjo, 2024), while evaluations are carried out periodically to measure effectiveness and adjust approaches (Andrade & Heritage, 2017); (Black & William, 2018).

Methodological strategies used in this activity include: (1) Focus Group Discussion (FGD): used to explore the needs, interests, and expectations of students and pesantren administrators (Zalisman, 2020); (Latief, 2011). (2) Interactive Learning: Using digital media based on the context of Islamic boarding schools such as Islamic videos, conversation simulations, educational games, and English language support applications (Raharjo, 2024). (3) Performance-Based Evaluation: The application of pre-tests and post-tests to measure competency improvement, as well as weekly reflections to adjust learning materials and methods in real time (Burns, 2010); (Black & William, 2018).

Overall, this service activity consists of five main stages, namely: (1) Identification of needs in the form of initial dialogue with students and administrators to map learning challenges and needs. (2) Program planning in the form of preparing a thematic curriculum, selecting learning media, and setting an activity schedule. (3) The implementation of the program is in the form of intensive learning sessions with a hands-on approach based on student life. (4) Evaluation and reflection in the form of the use of quantitative and qualitative instruments to assess the effectiveness of activities and continuous feedback. (5) Sustainability and recommendations: Preparation of long-term strategies so that programs can be adopted independently by Islamic boarding schools.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This service program was carried out for three months with a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach that prioritizes the active involvement of students, administrators, and teachers of the Tahfidzul Qur'an Al-Quds Islamic Boarding School. The main goal of this activity is to improve students' English language skills through contextual, participatory, and value-based learning strategies. Each cycle produces different findings, both in terms of process and achievement. The implementation of the community service program at the Tahfidzul Qur'an Al-Quds Islamic Boarding School begins with the Look stage, which is the identification of problems and learning needs. In this stage, the service team conducted direct observations to the pesantren environment and held a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with the administrators and students. The results of observations show that English learning in Islamic boarding schools still tends to be passive, limited to memorizing vocabulary and mastering grammar without context. The students tend to be passive in speaking, and one of the students stated,

"I'm afraid of being wrong, so I prefer to keep quiet when I'm told to speak English."

This statement reflects the existence of affective barriers that need to be addressed through a more participatory and contextual approach. In addition, the pre-test showed an average score of only 49.07 out of a maximum of 100, with a low score of 45 and a high of 55.

The community service team also maps the learning styles and special needs of students. The participants, aged between 15–20 years, were mostly from religious educational backgrounds and were not used to using English in the context of everyday communication. Through an in-depth interview, the pesantren management said that students often have difficulty translating Islamic values into English. This is a challenge as well as an opportunity to design learning based on religious contexts. Identification of needs also includes the collection of information about routine activities of Islamic boarding schools such as congregational prayers, recitations, and tafsir discussions, which will later be used as contextual teaching materials.

The second stage, namely Think, is the process of planning and compiling thematic learning materials. In this stage, the team developed a thematic curriculum based on the daily activities of the students. The learning materials are designed to be relevant to their lives, such as introducing themselves, explaining the ablution procedures, delivering announcements of pesantren activities, and discussing Islamic values in English. The material is adjusted to the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) approaches. Students are involved in the selection of materials to foster a sense of belonging. This is in line

with the PAR principle which emphasizes active collaboration between the facilitator and the assisted community.

As part of the Think stage, the team also prepared digital-based learning media, such as Islamic videos, interactive vocabulary games, and conversation simulations. This strategy is applied to answer the challenges of the learning style of digital generation students who require a visual and kinesthetic approach as depicted in Figure 2. In the internal teacher training session, the pesantren administrators welcomed the method designed because it provides a larger space for students to actively speak. One of the ustadz conveyed,

"So far, we have focused more on memorization. This program opens up our insights into how to teach more lively English."



Figure 2. Interactive Learning Session Using Islamic Videos and Vocabulary Games

The Act stage is the core of the service process carried out at the Tahfidzul Qur'an Al-Quds Islamic Boarding School. At this stage, all designs that have been prepared in the Think stage are applied directly in learning activities. The training program is carried out intensively for three months with a frequency of twice per week. Each session lasts 90 minutes and is facilitated by a dedicated team and Islamic boarding school administrators who have been trained beforehand. The learning material is focused on developing speaking skills based on students' daily activities. For example, the initial session begins with an introduction exercise, conveying daily activities, and describing worship activities in English. The learning method is participatory and task-based, where students are challenged to complete English-language activities that are directly related to their world, such as guiding guests in English or explaining the procedures of praying to strangers in a simulated manner.

Active interaction is key in this stage. To avoid a monotonous learning atmosphere, the team used various media and approaches, such as short Islamic



videos in English, vocabulary games, and role-plays based on real-life situations that occurred in the Islamic boarding school. For example, in one of the sessions, students were asked to play the role of "host" and "guest" in a simulation of foreign guest visits to the cottage. This exercise not only trains the courage to speak but also hone improvisation and spontaneity of language. The students looked more enthusiastic when the material was related to their daily lives. One of the students said,

"It's really exciting, I can talk about what I do every day, such as reading the Qur'an or participating in deliberations, but using English."

This shows that when learning is associated with the local religious and cultural context, students become more motivated to learn.

In an effort to increase student confidence, the program also encourages the formation of peer mentors. Students who show better ability to understand the material and speak are given the responsibility to help their groupmates in small discussions as described in Figure 3. This model has proven to be effective because the learning atmosphere has become more informal and familiar. Students who were initially reluctant to speak in front of the class became more open when interacting with fellow friends. One of the mentors said,

"I'm happy to be able to help other friends. Sometimes they are more comfortable asking me first before asking the ustadz or the coach's brother."

This activity creates a learning ecosystem that is oriented towards collaboration, not competition, and strengthens leadership values among students.



Figure 3. One of the students led a group discussion as a mentor in an English learning session

In the early weeks, students still showed doubts and fear of making mistakes, but over time they began to be confident. This can be seen from the increase in participation in classes, group discussions, and the emergence of student initiatives to become peer mentors. This practice-based learning creates a more open and collaborative learning atmosphere. The post-test data showed a significant increase, with an average score of 66.27. This means that there is an increase of 17.2 points from the pre-test score, reflecting the effectiveness of the approach applied. The following are the descriptive statistics of the results of the English proficiency test for 15 students described in Table 1.

Table 1. Pre-test and Post-test Assessment Results

Test Type	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max	Mean Difference
Pre-Test	49.07	3.03	45	55	
Post-Test	66.27	3.50	60	72	+17.2

Post-test activities were carried out at the end of the program as a form of final evaluation of the students' achievements after participating in a series of English learning activities based on the context of the Islamic boarding school. This post-test consists of two parts, namely the written test and the oral test. The written test measures students' understanding of thematic vocabulary, basic sentence structure, and ability to understand the context of simple readings related to pesantren activities. Meanwhile, the oral test was carried out individually, where each student was asked to introduce themselves, explain their daily routine, and answer questions about pesantren activities in English. The post-test atmosphere was serious but full of enthusiasm as described in Figure 4.



Figure 4. Implementation of Post-Test to Evaluate the Improvement of Students' Abilities After the Program Lasts for Three Months

In addition to quantitative results, qualitative reflection also showed significant changes in affective and social aspects. One of the administrators stated,

"The students began to dare to say sentences even though they were still simple, and they looked proud."

This improvement is not only in the technical aspects of the language, but also in terms of courage, confidence and active engagement. Mentoring activities between students are one of the main successes that are beyond expectations, because it reflects the internalization of values and the sustainability of the learning process.

The evaluation process is carried out not only at the end, but also periodically every week. Joint reflection is an important part of the Act stage, where the accompanying team, administrators, and students sit together to discuss what has been learned, the challenges faced, and the adjustments that need to be made. This formative evaluation ensures that the materials and methods used are always relevant and adaptive to the development of students' abilities and interests. The team also provides additional training for administrators so that they can continue the program independently in the future.

One of the important aspects in the success of this program is the full support of the pesantren management. Their commitment creates a conducive and inclusive learning atmosphere. In addition, this program fosters a new awareness that English is not just a lesson, but a global da'wah tool that must be mastered by students. English is now seen as a bridge between local traditions and the global role of students as future Muslim dai and intellectuals. The active involvement of all parties strengthens the spirit of mutual cooperation in the development of Islamic boarding schools.

Overall, this PAR-based service shows that community-based learning, real practices, and religious values are able to significantly improve students' speaking skills. Not only in terms of technical aspects, but also in terms of motivation and courage. The success of this program is proof that educational transformation in Islamic boarding schools can be achieved without sacrificing religious identity. On the contrary, Islamic values are the main force in creating meaningful and contextual language learning.

This program also fosters new awareness among students and pesantren administrators that English proficiency is an important skill in the global era. English is no longer seen as a learning burden, but as a relevant tool for the future of students, both in further education and in cross-cultural da'wah. Full support from the administrators helps create a more inclusive learning atmosphere and encourages the sustainability of the program.

The results of the implementation of this service program show that the Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach is actually able to improve the English speaking skills of students in the pesantren environment (Raharjo, 2024). The active involvement of students in the entire learning process, from planning to reflection, is in line with the views of Kemmis et al., (2014) who emphasize that PAR fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility in students. In the context of pesantren, this has proven to be effective because students are not only positioned as learning objects, but also as subjects who contribute to determining the direction

and content of learning (Idris, 2025). This approach also reflects the spirit of community-based learning which, according to Fikri, (2018), is relevant to be applied in pesantren education based on collective values and a culture of mutual cooperation.

Furthermore, the increase in post-test scores and active participation of students can be explained through the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach applied in learning activities. CLT emphasizes the importance of using language as a communication tool in the real context of Zalisman (2020), which in this program is realized through the practice of talking about pesantren activities such as prayer, deliberation, and self-introduction. Comprehensible input theory also supports the use of materials that are easy to understand and relevant to students' experiences (Qasserras, 2023). When learning materials are directly linked to the daily lives of students, the level of understanding and involvement increases significantly.

In addition to the cognitive aspect, the affective changes experienced by students are an important point in this discussion. The courage to speak up and the growing confidence reflect the formation of integrative motivation as stated by Dörnyei, (2005), which is an internal motivation that arises when students feel that learning is meaningful personally and socially. A supportive learning environment, peer mentor model, and contextual use of digital media are the triggers for this motivation. The study of Nurtresnaningsih, (2018) emphasizes that the use of media in accordance with the local values of students can strengthen language literacy and increase students' emotional engagement.

Finally, the integration of Islamic values in English learning not only enriches the learning context, but also answers criticism of conventional teaching methods that are too theoretical and independent of the reality of students (Gunawan and Rahmah, 2019). The findings of this program are in line with the view of Black & William, (2018), that foreign language learning in pesantren needs to consider local values to be relevant and accepted by the community. Thus, the program not only has an impact on improving technical English language skills, but also becomes a model of empowerment rooted in the local culture and participatory spirit of the pesantren community.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This service program succeeded in improving the english speaking skills of the students of the Tahfidzul Qur'an Al-Quds Islamic Boarding School based on religious values and pesantren life activities. With participatory and contextual learning, students experience significant improvements in aspects of thematic vocabulary, fluency in speaking, and confidence in using English orally. Quantitative results showed an average score increase of 17.2 points with consistent standard deviation, while qualitative results reflected the emergence of learning motivation,



peer mentoring, and active participation in each cycle. The usefulness of the program is reflected in the positive response of students and administrators to the learning methods and the long-term impact that is felt in real terms.

For further development, it is recommended to develop advanced materials that focus on speaking for academic and daily life. Teacher capacity building through technology-based training and active learning also needs to be implemented. The involvement of female students more broadly also needs to be carried out. Replication of programs in other Islamic boarding schools with adaptation of their respective local contexts.

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