

BRIDGING CULTURES: ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING FROM PESANTREN TO AMERICA

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Abstract: This article is a narrative inquiry research that focuses on a young female santri named Aisya (pseudo name), who got the MORA Overseas Student Mobility Award (MOSMA) for six months at Buffalo University, New York, USA. The research analyses Aisya's life story and her English learning strategy. It is lensed from three perspectives: English as linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 2018), English as a social investment (Peirce, 1995) and creative discursive agency (Collins, 2000). the data was collected through in-depth and unstructured interviews three times through Zoom meetings; the supporting data is also in the form of Aisya's essay related to her goal in life. The research revealed that mastering English, instead of coming from internal motivation, is also much influenced by social agents such as family, *Kyai* and Pesantren. The ability to speak English also activates social investment, transforming it into many opportunities for creative discursive agency, such as getting a high score on TOEFL and acquiring a scholarship to America like Aisya had. Pedagogically, it resulted in some implications, such as the importance of providing a more student-centred approach in the classroom. This signifies that the teacher can accommodate the diversity of each student's background, thereby creating motivation to learn English. For pesantren, it suggested having a solid commitment instead of teaching religious knowledge and developing a foreign language, English.

Keywords: *English language; narrative inquiry; pesantren; social investment*

INTRODUCTION

English is a global language since it represents two significant things; the first is English as a medium of communication in the domains of government, the law court, media and the educational system. Secondly, English has become the priority in a country's foreign-language teaching. English is now the most widely taught foreign language in over 100 countries (Crystal, 2003). However, the domination of English in the areas of economics, culture and teaching is also contradictory to religious matters, especially Islam. Originally from Western and non-Muslim countries, English is often associated with Christian missionaries. Christian missionaries set up some Christian schools in its colonized territory utilizing the social and political infrastructure, which led the native people to convert to Christianity. Furthermore, English has a pivotal role in its process in such a situated context (Hamid, 2022) (Vandrick, 2018)

in contrast, as the oldest religious institution, Pesantren has advanced from religious teaching purely into incorporating English language teaching in Pesantren curriculum as a response to modernization and societal expectations for the integration between spiritual and general

knowledge (Isbah, 2020) (Sinan & Yusuf, 2019) and (Sari, 2023). English teaching in pesantren is undeniable because pesantren provides religious knowledge and teaching English to posit pesantren in the global world.

English language teaching is one way to get pesantren more modern than before since it is hoped that Santri will be included in the international community by mastering English (Irham, 2023). Mastering English and communicating in English is vital to developing English language teaching in Pesantren so that students can convey Islamic messages to all levels of world society (Umar, 2022; Farid & Lamb, 2020)

Learning English at a Pesantren is influenced by several other motivational elements. One crucial component is Pesantren's supportive atmosphere for learning, which is enhanced by personal incentives (Madkur et al., 2022). Acknowledging the importance of English language competence for students, Pesantren leaders integrate English language training into their curricula (Rohmah et al., 2019). English language teaching in Pesantren is carried out formally and informally. Formally, English is taught following formal institutional learning, and the curriculum follows the state.

Meanwhile, the informal learning English curriculum adapts to the needs of Pesantren (Andriani, 2024).

Furthermore, considering the importance of English in the globalization era, English is not only focused in the classroom but also has a vital role in the social structure and individual agency (Podboj & Lujic, 2020). Bourdieu (1973) states that cultural capital refers to attributes obtained through membership in a particular social class or group. In the context of the English language, we use the term linguistic capital, which is associated with language use and people's ability to produce appropriate expressions in a given social context appropriately. In Bourdieu's terms, English (in specific vital contexts such as education) represents more outstanding linguistic capital than the mother tongue: Children who have access to English are thus more privileged than those who do not and are more likely to possess more outstanding linguistic capital (Flowerdew & Miller, 2008). Apart from having a function as linguistic capital, English also has a role as a social investment that connects a person's language skills with the changing social world (Peirce, 1995). Thus, investing in English language ability also invests in the learner's social identity, which is constantly changing across time and space. That of "critical discursive agency" (Collins, 1993) is how individuals can initiate or take advantage of opportunities for the creative development of their discursive practices. Following on from Bourdieu's notion of subjective action and objective conditioning, Collins argues that subjects in a reactive role can initiate positive action because of the power of social structure, class condition, capital composition, habitus, etc. Creative discursive agency is a notion that allows individual agency to counterbalance the weight of the social structure (Flowerdew & Miller, 2008).

Narrative inquiry was developed by Clandinin and Connelly (2004) as a tool to illustrate the story of human experience, enabling researchers to convey experience in all its complexity and richness. As stated by Barkhuizen, Benson, and Chik (Barkhuizen et al., 2013), narrative research methodology and sociocultural theory have a "connection". This research aims to provide an overview of English language teaching in Pesantren by providing examples of narrative analysis of female students. Pesantren has opened and adapted by including English language teaching while maintaining the traditions and identity as an Islamic institution.

Recent studies on the narrative inquiry of

English learners mainly focus on identity negotiation and strategic language efforts (Abrar, 2019), (Nguyen & Dao, 2019), (Zhang, 2019), (Aguilar Martínez, 2020). Another narrative inquiry also focuses on exploring English teachers (Madkur et al., 2022) and (Podboj & Lujic, 2020). The study of narrative inquiry about female postgraduate learners of English in Iraq (Hajar, 2018) showed that social networks influence language learning strategy. The research also revealed that pedagogical practice in Arab and elsewhere needs to be more transformative enough to give space and opportunity to female learners. Moreover, the discussion of the social structure and individual agency in second language learning was also deliberated by (Flowerdew & Miller, 2008), focusing on studying the life history of three young engineering graduates in Hong Kong. The research suggested that opportunities for language learners outside the classroom need to be provided to balance investment and the learner's agency. On the other hand, Pam Nilan (2009) also discussed the narrative story of a young female *santri* from the perspective of Foucauldian theory. It suggested that pesantren are the spirit education, lived experience, and learning resources for the *santri*.

Until now, no scholarly work has focused on how *santri* plays its agency in the language field in the context of Pesantren. This narrative inquiry research article will analyze the life history of a young female *santri* named Aisya. The primary data is the narrative, narrated by Aisya three times through online interviews. The focus of this research is to look at English as a social investment and individual agency through Aisya's life history of learning English from their first encounter until she successfully visited America via the MOSMA grant.

This article begins by discussing English learning in the context of social structure and individual agency. It then follows with the findings of the interview session with Aisya; it starts with Aisya's early encounter with English and follows the phase of Aisya getting a MORA grant at the University of Buffalo, US. The following section is the discussion and conclusion.

METHOD

The present study was a narrative inquiry, defined as the narrative or stories used in qualitative research to describe human action and experience (Polkinghorne, 1995). Based on applied linguistics theory, narrative inquiry has four main conceptions: canonical stories, life histories, grand narratives, and narratives in interaction (Downey

& Clandinin, 2019).

Aisya's narrative story became the primary data for the research. It was collected through interviews offline and online. The choice of Aisya's narrative story as the object is based on some considerations; four students were awarded the MOSMA scholarship and went to Malaysia, Morocco, and the US. Aisya flew to the US. Moreover, Aisya had the Pesantren family background, suitable for the research context. Having a pesantren family background could bring differences in Aisya's experience from that of others. The culture of Pesantren has influenced much of Aisya's motivation to learn English from childhood until she was awarded the MOSMA scholarship.

The interview was conducted semi-structured once for offline and three times for online meetings, for around one hour. The first offline meeting started with an introduction informally with Aisya. In the first interview, Aisya was informed about her rights and role in the research study and asked about her consent for research purposes.

The second Zoom meeting was about chronologically examining Aisya's personal information, especially about her childhood and family. This was followed by the second and third meetings to explore Aisya's educational background, motivation, and learning style in studying English. The fourth meeting focused on Aisya's preparation for getting the MOSMA scholarship and her experience studying and living in the US.

The supporting data was also acquired as a personal essay written by Aisya as the assignment submitted to her lecture in the US. This supporting data was very important to understanding Aisya's context concerning English learning. Then, the recording data were transcribed and translated for analysis.

The analysis of the data was used narrative inquiry (Mertova & Webster, 2019). Firstly, the data were arranged chronologically, from Aisya's first time learning English in her childhood until she finally successfully studied in the US. Secondly, the coding was applied based on three categories: English learning strategy and lensed from three perspectives: English as linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 2018), English as social investment (Peirce, 1995) and creative discursive agency (Collins, 2000).

The collected data was in Bahasa Indonesia and translated into English. To familiarize myself with the data, I read the transcribed data many

times actively and critically. The coding underwent three phases; the first was coding manually line by line, and different categories were assigned. This phase highlighted the statement that captured Aisya's language learning efforts and her strategy for learning English. The code was then distributed into three general themes: (1) English learning strategy, (2) Aisya's ability to learn English, which influenced her life, (3) English as a social investment and (4) creative discursive agency. The second phase was axial coding, which focuses on highlighting the phrase that refers to Aisya's emotional feelings in learning English to discover Aisya's motivation for learning English. The last was an interpretation of the coding.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Aisya biography

Aisya was born in East Java, Indonesia, and grew up in a Pesantren environment. Her first encounter with English was in primary school, where she developed an interest in English through listening to music. Despite her family's focus on religious education, Aisya pursued English independently, driven by intrinsic motivation.

Aisya was the second child with one older brother and one younger brother. Growing up as the daughter of *Kyai* and living in the Pesantren area, Aisya has learned religious knowledge from her childhood. Aisya's first encounter with the English language was in grade 3 of primary school when she was nine. However, Aisya found the interesting to English when she listened to the music of the 90' boyband Backstreet Boys and Westlife from the cassette belonging to her mother. Aisya began to learn English independently by translating the meaning of song lyrics word by word. Living in the Pesantren, Aisya's family is only concerned with the religious knowledge of their children since the children hope to continue the parents' leadership in the Pesantren. On the other hand, Aisya's parents did not support nor neglect her daughter's interest in English. The main point is that Aisya keeps learning and being a well-mannered daughter.

After completing her junior high school, Aisya continued her senior high school education at a Pesantren near her home. The Pesantren, where Aisya stayed, integrated teaching religious knowledge and mastering two foreign languages, Arabic and English. The language environment in Pesantren helped develop Aisya's English skills very well.

The pandemic of COVID-19 in 2020 influenced the rule of Islamic boarding schools to send their

students home and study from home. During her stay at home, Aisya followed some TOEFL preparation courses and TOEFL tests online. This chance allowed Aisya to learn about TOEFL and get a good TOEFL score. Upon returning to Pesantren, at the direction of her parents, Aisya continued her education at the university based on Pesantren and took the English Education Department. Even though Aisya wanted to continue studying outside Pesantren and taking medicine, she preferred to follow her parents' advice. When she returned to Pesantren, Aisya was chosen as a TOEFL teacher at the language institute on her campus. In the fifth semester in 2023, Aisya passed the selection for the Ministry of Religion's MOSMA program to study for one semester at Buffalo University in New York, USA.

Linguistic capital

Language learning motivation is defined as depicting an individual's ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become and what they do not want to become through their language learning (Dörnyei, 2003). Aisya's first encounter with English was when she was nine, listening to English songs from some 90' boy band cassettes. Although she began her formal English learning in her fifth grade elementary class with the primary material, such as an introduction and some daily vocabulary, Aisya kept learning independently by translating some words into the lyrics.

"I listened to the songs several times; they were perfect. Finally, I listened to the song over and over again. Finally, I rewrote the lyrics and looked for the meaning. I did not care about pronunciation and so on, but over time, I started to be able to speak English, so it was my start to be interested in English." (Aisya's transcript interview).

Aisya comes from the Pesantren family; her mother and her father's educational background also originated from Pesantren. Nobody in her family can speak English since their concern is religious knowledge. However, Aisya insisted on studying English independently and informally since childhood. From the interview data, in recalling the memory of her childhood, Aisya already intended to learn English without knowing the importance of learning English and what is significant to have the ability to speak English. Furthermore, their earlier motivation to learn English has brought her some chances related to English in the future.

Starting from primary school, after returning from school, I read English books; I like reading books and reading all the subjects. I like reading books in English, and since then, I have liked English. While studying in Junior High School, I answered all the English worksheets before entering class. I like speaking and learning to speak by myself. When I was in Senior High School, I studied English more deeply. My passion became even more honed when I entered Senior High School and stayed in Pesantren (Aisya's transcript interview).

From Aisya's explanation in her interview, it is clear that she has tended to learn English in her way since childhood. Her love of English encouraged her to create independent learning strategies. The first strategy is translating words into song lyrics, the second is reading English material taught at school, and the third is practising speaking independently or with friends. As suggested by Dörnyei (2009), there are two kinds of possible self-learning: the ideal and the ought-to selves. Aisya shows the ideal self through learning strategies and efforts in learning English, which she carries out independently. At the same time, the ought-to selves are the motivation and the endurance of Aisya in learning English.

My score continued to increase; my TOEFL score was 600, and I was then known as the school's master. Finally, my lecturer asked me to teach at the campus language centre. You have to change the system, especially in the TOEFL structure (Aisya's transcript interview)

When Aisya was in the third semester, the COVID-19 pandemic was coming, and it caused the regulation of Islamic boarding schools, which required their students to study at home for months. Amid her boredom studying long distances, Aisya tried new things by taking free TOEFL preparation and TOEFL tests online. Even though she had never studied TOEFL at the Islamic boarding school, Aisya continued to learn and attempted the TOEFL test four times. When she returned to the Islamic boarding school, with her English skills getting better and an adequate TOEFL score, Aisya was known as a master of structure, which made her chosen to be the language development administrator at the Pesantren and become a TOEFL instructor at the language centre on campus. It highlights how high-stakes examinations (in particular TOEFL) were pivotal in Aisya's language learning investment and her changing language learning motivations. English was the key to accomplishing her ultimate vision.

Aisya's journey illustrates how English

functions as linguistic capital, providing her with social and academic opportunities. Her self-driven efforts in learning English and achieving a high TOEFL score led to her becoming a TOEFL instructor at her Pesantren. This aligns with Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital, where access to English provides more extraordinary social privilege and opportunities (Flowerdew & Miller, 2008).

Social agents

After graduating from senior high school, Aisya continued her education at an Islamic boarding school, according to her parents' instructions. He was disappointed because he could not enter the medical field according to his dreams, but she agreed with her parents' choice. Because no medical department was on campus, Aisya finally chose the English education department based on her passion.

“My parents supported me, but I didn't speak Arabic when I bought it. No one in my family can speak English; I'm the only one learning it.”

As members of the Pesantren family, Aisya's family firmly adheres to Pesantren-style values and culture, manifested through everyday life. Pesantren's life is a role model for students and the people around them; it should consider the goodness of oneself and the many people around them. Having disapproved of their child's ability to speak English instead of deepening religious knowledge, Aisya's parents finally agreed and supported their daughter in learning English, assuming that one day, she would become an English teacher and teach it to her students at home. Aisya's father also agrees that having the ability to speak English is very important in this era.

Furthermore, Aisya attended Pesantren, which is focused on religious teaching and language development, which requires all students to communicate using Arabic and English daily. Kyai's role is also crucial in Aisya's learning process. The commitment of Kyai to developing both religious knowledge and foreign languages creates a boarding school environment that supports language development. Aisya's abilities were increasingly honed while at pesantren, especially her speaking skills because they were often used when communicating with her friends. Kyai at the Islamic boarding school also provided support when Aisya managed to get a scholarship to America, which incidentally is a Western

country with a non-Muslim majority. This indicates that Pesantren has experienced a shift in perspective from teaching only religious knowledge to teaching non-religious subjects, including developing foreign languages.

On the other hand, even though Islamic boarding schools are starting to implement foreign language teaching, especially English, they still limit their students from using gadgets in Islamic boarding schools. As experienced by Aisya while studying at the Islamic boarding school, the Islamic boarding school forbids students from using laptops or cellphones, so Aisya feels that she needs to be more timely in knowing information and is technologically sluggish compared to students outside the Islamic boarding school. This condition made Aisya think she could only use her English skills in the context of the Islamic boarding school and get a scholarship abroad. However, Aisya believes that obeying the rules of the Islamic boarding school, Kyai, and their parents is best for her.

Aisya's parents and Pesantren's environment were crucial in her English learning journey. Despite initial reservations, her parents supported her interest in English and recognized its importance. Pesantren's integration of English and Arabic language teaching created a supportive environment for Aisya's language development. The role of the Kyai in promoting language learning further highlights the shift in Pesantren education towards modernization.

Creative discursive agency

In the fifth semester of her education in the English Department, Aisya successfully passed the MOSMA program. The MOSMA Overseas Student Mobility Awards (MOSMA) is one of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation programs in the form of a physical mobility program that provides opportunities for students to study at foreign universities. The Indonesian Religious Ministry Affair and the Indonesia Endowment Fund for Education Agency supervise the program. Having English language skills and an ITP TOEFL score, Aisya managed to get the opportunity to study for six months at the University at Buffalo, New York, USA.

“Since I studied at Pesantren, I have rarely prayed to be able to go abroad. That's why I was shocked when I got the scholarship. I had never imagined that. I realized that Allah had a better plan. While studying on campus based on Pesantren, I got a scholarship abroad. If I hadn't

been at Pesantren, I mightn't have gotten the scholarship."

During six months of studying at Buffalo University, Aisya took 12 credits with four courses in the English literature department. Aisya is the only student from a private Islamic boarding school-based university among 21 other students from Indonesia. From the interview with Aisya, she had no vision of going abroad because of limited access to information in Islamic boarding schools. Most of her time was spent in an Islamic boarding school, and she had the opportunity to go home twice a year. The opportunity to get a scholarship abroad was the turning point for Aisya in learning English since childhood. Also, it became an encouragement for other students at the Islamic boarding school that living in an Islamic boarding school does not necessarily close the opportunity to get a scholarship abroad.

Aisya's success in obtaining the MOSMA scholarship exemplifies creative discursive agency. Despite limited access to technology and information, she leveraged her English skills and TOEFL score to secure the scholarship, demonstrating individual agency in navigating social structures. This supports Collins' notion of creative agency, where individuals initiate positive actions despite social constraints (Flowerdew & Miller, 2008).

The findings highlight the interplay between social structure and individual agency in language learning. Aisya's internal motivation, supported by external social agents, enabled her to achieve significant milestones in her academic journey. This underscores the importance of providing opportunities for language learners to develop their skills outside the classroom.

The above finding illustrates that learning English is not only related to classroom teaching and learning activities. Nevertheless, the social context is also pivotal in encouraging someone to master the English language (Ma'rifah et al., 2020), (Jiang & Zhang, 2019). The findings in this research state that Aisya's motivation is more influenced by internal motivation, which is implemented in her desire to learn languages independently. Aisya's internal motivation to study TOEFL made her successful in getting a scholarship abroad and becoming a TOEFL teacher on her campus. On the other hand, external motivation is also essential, as is the family role, the Islamic boarding school environment, and the commitment of Kyai as the Islamic boarding school leader to developing the English language.

As suggested by (Farid et al., 2023), institutional factors play a role in influencing the learner's motivation, especially in the Pesantren context. In the context of Aisya's Pesantren, which limits its students' contact with digital information under the pretext of protecting its students from the influence of the outside world, it allows its students to go to America, which is predominantly non-Muslim.

Furthermore, the research findings align with Norton's (1995) idea that motivation to learn English is also a social investment in which Aisya invests her time and efforts. English language ability affects social structure and individual agency. It also led to individual reproduction and personal transformation (Pennycook, 1998). Aisya is a young female santri born and has lived in Pesantren most of her life. However, she showed independence in deciding her vision of life through her ability to speak English. It presented the agency of Aisya as the female santri to reach the goal of life. In the Pesantren context, it displayed the equal chance between male and female learners, and Pesantren also gave equal rights to female learners in gaining their learning vision. As suggested by (El-Dib, 2004), there are no significant differences between gender and language learning strategies and mastery levels.

Aisya's life story, in correlation to her English learning, has involved pedagogy, and social context and social agency have a pivotal role in motivating students to learn English. Each student comes from a diverse social and cultural context, and this influences the student's learning motivation (Canagarajah, 1999). English teaching-learning should create student-centred learning so that the diversity of each student's background can be accommodated by the teacher and motivate each student to learn English. Furthermore, teachers should provide many opportunities for a creative discursive agency outside the classroom, such as what Aisya experienced with the MOSMA scholarship.

Furthermore, in the Pesantren's context, students should be given more opportunities to get in touch with technology and digital information. Teachers in Pesantren must also be more technologically literate so that learning in Pesantren can be more modern and technology-based (Tubagus et al., 2023). It is also time for TOEFL learning to be taught in Islamic boarding schools so that when students graduate, they have broader opportunities for academic and non-academic purposes by having a TOEFL score. As happened to Aisya, after completing her MOSMA program, the pesantren decided to prepare for

TOEFL class and TOEFL test as the final requirements before they finished their education in Pesantren.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals how English language learning serves as a social investment and a tool for individual agency, as illustrated by Aisya's life story. Her journey from a Pesantren in Indonesia to studying in the United States demonstrates the transformative potential of linguistic capital. The support from her Pesantren environment and her intrinsic motivation played crucial roles in her success.

The findings highlight the need for Pesantren to integrate technology and modern language teaching practices to provide students with broader opportunities. Social agents, such as family and Pesantren leaders, are essential in fostering students' motivation and supporting their academic goals.

Nevertheless, this present study also has some limitations, such as the length of the narrative story as the object, since it only focuses on the story of Aisya from her childhood until the moment she got the MOSMA scholarship. Future research could explore longitudinal studies of Pesantren students who have achieved academic success abroad, providing a deeper understanding of the interplay between language learning, social investment, and individual agency.

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