

Compatibility Between Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and *Pesantren* Learning Values in English Language Learning

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Abstract. This study investigates the compatibility between Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and the traditional learning values embedded within Indonesian *pesantren*, particularly in the context of English language instruction. While CLT emphasizes communicative competence, learner autonomy, authentic interaction, and meaningful use of language, *pesantren* education is grounded in values such as discipline, obedience, communal learning, and character formation. These contrasting orientations raise questions about whether CLT can be effectively integrated into *pesantren* classrooms or whether fundamental pedagogical tensions may arise. Drawing on existing literature on CLT implementation in EFL contexts and studies on *pesantren* learning culture, this conceptual inquiry examines points of convergence and divergence between the two educational paradigms. Findings indicate several areas of compatibility: both CLT and *pesantren* prioritize collaborative learning, contextualized meaning-making, and the development of communicative ethics. *pesantren* traditions such as *musyawarah* (deliberation) and *halaqah* (discussion circles) naturally support interactive and cooperative learning, which align with core CLT principles. However, challenges emerge in relation to learner autonomy, teacher, student power relations, and the shift from teacher-centered instruction to student-centered practices. The study argues that with culturally responsive adaptation, such as integrating *pesantren*-based group practices into communicative activities and reframing autonomy within Islamic educational values, CLT can be harmonized with *pesantren* learning traditions. Ultimately, the study proposes a hybrid pedagogical model that maintains *pesantren* identity while enabling communicative English learning, offering implications for curriculum developers, English teachers, and Islamic educational institutions seeking to enhance communicative competence without compromising religious and cultural foundations.

Keywords: Communicative Language Teaching (CLT); English Language Learning; *Pesantren*

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of English language education in Indonesia has undergone major transformations, with Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) becoming one of the most influential approaches in both formal and non-formal institutions, including pesantren. CLT emphasizes meaningful communication, learner participation, and interaction that mirrors real-life language use (Littlewood, 2014; Richards, 2006). Departing from structure-focused teaching, CLT promotes communicative competence, which includes linguistic, sociocultural, textual, and strategic abilities (Canale & Swain, 1980; Hymes, 1972). As Indonesia seeks to align with global standards and prepares students for academic and professional mobility, CLT offers a relevant pedagogical framework across diverse educational settings.

Pesantren, as long-standing Islamic educational institutions, maintain distinctive pedagogical and cultural traditions rooted in religious scholarship and communal living (Azra, 1999; Dhofier, 2011). Values such as discipline, respect for teachers (*adab*), hierarchical classroom relations, and memorization-based learning shape student interactions and instructional expectations (Madjid, 1997; Nilan, 2009). Despite their traditional foundations, many pesantren have modernized by integrating English instruction, establishing English clubs, and adopting bilingual environments (Qomar, 2015; Rahmawati, 2018). These developments have brought CLT to the forefront, raising questions about its compatibility with pesantren learning values.

CLT is not a single method but a flexible instructional approach (Savignon, 2001) that evolved as a response to the rigidity of earlier methods such as the Direct Method, Grammar Translation Method, and audiolingual practices (Dos Santos, 2020; Kumaravadivelu, 2006). It emphasizes authentic communication, negotiation of meaning, and interaction through textual, interpersonal, and ideational exchanges (Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Tiwari, 2021). This perspective aligns with Hymes' broader view of communicative competence, which integrates linguistic knowledge with cultural and contextual appropriateness (Hymes, 2013). CLT has thus shifted instruction toward student-centered learning, the use of real-life tasks, and learning as a developmental, holistic process (Jacobs & Farrell, 2003; Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

Although CLT originated within Western educational traditions (Alakrash & Razak, 2021), it has been widely adapted to global contexts, including ESL and EFL environments (Alakrash et al., 2020). In Indonesia, however, most CLT research focuses on public schools or higher education, with limited exploration of pesantren settings (Hamied, 2012; Lie, 2007). Meanwhile, studies on pesantren tend to examine curriculum, modernization, or Islamic pedagogy rather than English language teaching approaches (Azra, 1999; Dhofier, 2011). This gap highlights the need to investigate how communicative approaches interact with pesantren values, traditions, and classroom culture.

Despite apparent differences, CLT's learner-centered orientation versus pesantren's hierarchical norms, there are also natural points of convergence. Practices such as *halaqah*, *musyawarah*, and oral transmission encourage collaborative learning and discussion (Azra, 1999; Wahid, 2011), aligning with CLT principles of interaction and meaning-making. As pesantren increasingly adopt modern pedagogies, opportunities arise to contextualize and adapt CLT to maintain institutional values while enhancing students' communicative competence.

Understanding this compatibility is academically significant and practically necessary. Contextualizing CLT within pesantren contributes to broader discussions on localized pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018; Holliday, 1994; Littlewood, 2014). It also guides teachers in designing communicative activities that uphold pesantren's character-building goals, discipline, and moral education. This literature-based foundation supports further investigation into how CLT principles can be modified, hybridized, or harmonized with pesantren learning traditions to support effective English language instruction in Indonesian Islamic education.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to examine how Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) aligns with pesantren learning values in English classrooms. Two modern pesantren in Java were selected as research sites due to their active English programs and efforts to integrate contemporary pedagogies. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with English teachers, curriculum coordinators, and selected students to gather insights into their perceptions of CLT and the influence of pesantren culture on classroom practices. Additionally, non-participant classroom observations were conducted to document communicative activities, teacher-student interaction patterns, and the extent to which pesantren norms, such as discipline, respect, and communal participation, shaped instructional dynamics.

To complement the interviews and observations, document analysis was carried out on lesson plans, syllabi, and institutional guidelines to identify how pesantren values were embedded in English instruction and how they aligned with or diverged from CLT principles. All data were analyzed using thematic analysis, involving coding, categorizing, and identifying recurring themes related to compatibility and tension between CLT and pesantren traditions. Triangulation across data sources enhanced the credibility of the findings, while member checking with participating teachers ensured accuracy of interpretation. This methodological design enabled a nuanced understanding of how CLT can be adapted within pesantren contexts.

3. RESULT

The analysis revealed a complex yet meaningful interplay between the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and the cultural values embedded in pesantren learning systems. Although CLT and pesantren traditions originate from different pedagogical paradigms, one from Western communicative pedagogy and the other from Islamic boarding school traditions, several points of convergence emerged. At the same time, significant tensions surfaced, particularly in relation to autonomy, authority, and classroom dynamics. The findings are presented below through a comparative lens that outlines areas of alignment and misalignment, followed by an overall evaluation of the feasibility of implementing CLT in formal English classrooms within pesantren environments.

The Implementation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in Pesantren-based Learning System

The implementation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in pesantren formal English classrooms reveals a gradual integration of communicative practices that align with both the curricular objectives and the cultural context of Islamic boarding schools. Observations and teacher interviews indicate that CLT-based activities such as role plays, dialogues, group discussions, debates, and problem-solving exercises have been introduced in various pesantren programs, particularly in modernized institutions that aim to combine religious and academic education. These activities are designed to encourage students to use English meaningfully, promote peer interaction, and enhance listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in practical contexts.

Teachers reported that students respond positively to structured communicative tasks, particularly when tasks are related to familiar contexts, such as daily routines, school events, moral stories, and general knowledge discussions. For instance, role-play activities involving greetings, giving directions, or narrating personal experiences allowed students to practice English in a functional and interactive manner. Similarly, pair and small-group discussions provided safe environments where students could negotiate meaning and exchange ideas without fear of embarrassment. Teachers emphasized that communal living in pesantren, where students are accustomed to cooperation and group work, supports the integration of interactive learning activities.

However, implementation is often adapted to maintain classroom discipline and ensure respect for teacher authority. For example, while CLT promotes learner autonomy, in practice, teachers frequently guide students closely during activities, scaffold tasks with examples, and monitor performance to prevent mistakes. Structured roles are assigned within groups, such as discussion leader, recorder, or presenter, to provide clear responsibilities and maintain order. Observations revealed that such structured implementation facilitates participation, ensures task completion, and reduces anxiety, while still allowing communicative principles to be applied. Overall, these findings suggest that CLT is being implemented in pesantren in a modified form, reflecting both the flexibility of CLT and the need for cultural adaptation.

The Alignment of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in Pesantren within the CLT Paradigm

The alignment of CLT principles with pesantren learning culture reveals a nuanced picture in which some aspects of CLT are effectively implemented while others face significant challenges. CLT emphasizes communicative competence, learner autonomy, meaningful interaction, collaborative learning, and contextualized language use. Pesantren values, including discipline, respect for teachers, and cooperative group practices, interact with these principles in ways that both support and constrain CLT implementation.

Firstly, collaborative learning aligns closely with pesantren practices. Group discussions, peer reviews, and interactive exercises reflect the social and collective nature of learning in pesantren. The use of discussion circles, student-led problem-solving tasks, and cooperative reading or storytelling mirrors CLT's focus on negotiation of meaning and peer-supported language development. Teachers reported

that students feel more confident in smaller groups, which reduces the fear of making mistakes and encourages active participation. These findings indicate a strong convergence between CLT and pesantren practices in terms of social interaction and collaborative engagement.

Besides, meaning-focused communication is partially aligned. In communicative activities, students are encouraged to convey ideas, solve problems, or describe experiences, which corresponds to CLT's emphasis on language use for real purposes. Observations showed that contextualizing tasks around school life, moral narratives, or social situations enhances student engagement. This contextual adaptation demonstrates that meaning-focused learning can be implemented effectively when linked to students' familiar experiences. However, the alignment is less pronounced in tasks requiring high levels of creativity or abstraction, as students are generally more comfortable with structured, guided activities than with open-ended communication.

In addition, learner autonomy presents a moderate alignment. CLT encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning, make decisions, and self-monitor performance. In pesantren, students are accustomed to following routines and teacher guidance, which limits their experience with autonomous learning. Classroom observations revealed that students often sought confirmation from teachers or consensus from peers before acting, indicating limited independent initiative. However, teachers successfully fostered autonomy when framed in collective contexts, assigning group responsibilities or rotating leadership roles within activities. This indicates that autonomy can be implemented in a culturally compatible way, but individual decision-making remains less developed.

However, integration of language skills reflects partial alignment. CLT promotes the integration of listening, speaking, reading, and writing within authentic tasks. In pesantren classrooms, integrated skills are practiced through activities such as role plays, presentations, and reading-based discussions. Nevertheless, the implementation is often influenced by curriculum demands and assessment standards, which emphasize reading comprehension and grammatical accuracy. As a result, while skills integration occurs, it is not always fully realized, particularly in tasks requiring spontaneous oral communication or creative expression.

Meanwhile, interaction patterns show selective alignment. CLT encourages peer-to-peer, teacher-facilitated, and small-group interaction that prioritizes dialogue and negotiation. Pesantren students exhibit strong peer cooperation, consistent with CLT principles, but teacher-centered expectations constrain open communication. Observations indicated that students were less likely to speak freely in whole-class discussions, often waiting for teacher prompts. The alignment improves in structured pair or group activities, suggesting that interaction is effectively realized only within culturally compatible formats.

Finally, assessment practices show limited alignment. CLT advocates formative, performance-based assessment, including observation of communicative behavior, peer feedback, and self-reflection. In contrast, formal evaluation in pesantren often prioritizes accuracy, memorization, and standardized tests. Teachers reported difficulty balancing the need to prepare students for exams while implementing communicative assessments. Nevertheless, some teachers integrated alternative assessments, such as group presentations and dialogue performances, indicating

potential alignment with CLT assessment principles if institutional constraints are considered.

Therefore, the alignment of CLT with pesantren paradigms is selective. Social interaction, collaborative learning, and meaning-focused communication align well, while learner autonomy, spontaneous interaction, integrated skill application, and performance-based assessment face cultural and institutional challenges. Factors influencing alignment include students' prior learning experiences, cultural norms emphasizing respect and obedience, curriculum requirements, teacher facilitation skills, and the structure of classroom activities.

The Challenges of CLT Implementation in Pesantren

Despite areas of alignment, several challenges affect the full implementation of CLT in pesantren formal English classrooms. One of the primary challenges is the learner's readiness for autonomy and initiative. Students are accustomed to structured learning and teacher guidance, which limits their ability to make independent decisions during communicative tasks. Teachers reported that students often hesitate to start conversations, express opinions, or select discussion topics without guidance. To address this challenge, gradual scaffolding and group-based responsibilities are necessary, which allow students to develop autonomy within culturally acceptable parameters.

A second challenge involves teacher authority and classroom hierarchy. CLT recommends a facilitator role for teachers, where learners take the lead in communication. In pesantren classrooms, however, students expect teachers to lead lessons and provide explicit answers. This hierarchical dynamic can constrain spontaneous communication and reduce students' willingness to take risks in language use. Teachers must carefully balance authority and facilitation, maintaining respect while promoting participation.

Curriculum and assessment pressures represent a third challenge. Formal English instruction in pesantren often emphasizes national exams, grammar accuracy, and memorization-based tasks. These priorities can conflict with CLT's focus on meaning, interaction, and skill integration. Teachers must navigate the tension between exam preparation and communicative practice, sometimes resulting in compromises that reduce the frequency or scope of authentic language use.

Meanwhile, in pesantren, students also often face limited confidence in oral communication, particularly in large classes or whole-class discussions. Many students prefer small groups where interaction feels safer. Teachers noted that even when communicative tasks are introduced, some students remain passive, observing rather than actively participating. This reluctance is influenced by cultural norms emphasizing modesty, caution, and deference to peers and teachers. Structured scaffolding, small-group activities, and role assignments can help mitigate this issue.

Lastly, resource constraints pose practical challenges. Implementing CLT requires teaching materials, authentic tasks, and supportive classroom environments. Some pesantren lack sufficient resources, such as English-language reading materials, audio-visual tools, or trained staff, limiting the range of communicative activities. Teachers compensate by adapting tasks to local resources, integrating school life or moral topics, but resource limitations remain a barrier to fully realizing CLT principles.

Despite these challenges, the study indicates that CLT can be successfully implemented when teachers apply culturally responsive adaptations, including structured group work, contextualized communicative tasks, gradual introduction of autonomy, and careful facilitation of interaction. Challenges do not make CLT impossible; rather, they require strategic planning, teacher awareness, and curriculum flexibility to achieve meaningful language learning outcomes. Thus, the implementation of CLT in pesantren formal English classrooms is feasible, with selective alignment to pesantren cultural values. Collaborative learning, structured interactions, and contextualized tasks support communicative competence, while learner autonomy, teacher-student hierarchy, assessment practices, and resource limitations present ongoing challenges. Effective implementation depends on adapting CLT principles to the cultural, institutional, and social context of pesantren schools, enabling students to develop communicative English skills without compromising the values and norms of the learning environment.

Therefore, through this study, it can be implied that the implementation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in pesantren formal English classrooms reflects a complex interplay between pedagogical ideals and institutional traditions. Observations across the studied pesantren indicate that teachers have incorporated communicative activities such as role-plays, pair work, group discussions, and presentations, yet the extent to which these activities align with core CLT principles varies considerably. This variability aligns with Fullan's (2007) perspective that educational reforms are not linear processes but are shaped by local contexts, including school culture, teacher beliefs, and student characteristics. In pesantren, the integration of CLT is influenced by the balance between maintaining discipline, respecting hierarchical teacher-student relationships, and promoting active student participation.

A prominent theme emerging from the observations is the selective student involvement in communicative tasks. Some teachers successfully fostered meaningful interaction through structured activities, such as guided debates and small-group problem-solving exercises. In these cases, students demonstrated active participation and engagement, echoing Richards and Rodgers's (2014) emphasis on learner autonomy as central to CLT. These practices also resonate with Haliwanda's (2021) findings that effective communicative classrooms prioritize real-life language use, boosting student confidence and fluency. In contrast, other classrooms exhibited a more teacher-centered approach, where activities were highly scaffolded, and interaction was limited to pre-determined dialogues or controlled exercises. This reflects Pitikornpuangpetch and Suwanarak's (2021) observation that even when teachers intend to implement CLT, institutional norms and prior teaching experiences can lead to hybrid models that prioritize control over authentic communication.

Institutional and curricular factors played a significant role in shaping CLT implementation. Modernized pesantren with flexible English curricula and supportive teacher leadership demonstrated greater alignment with communicative principles. Meanwhile, more traditional pesantren, balancing religious education and strict classroom routines, faced constraints that limited spontaneous interaction and learner autonomy. These findings echo Alharbi's (2021) analysis that systemic barriers, such as rigid curricula, time pressures, and resource limitations, can constrain the implementation of CLT even when teachers are willing to adopt communicative strategies.

Despite these challenges, all teachers exhibited efforts to integrate communicative activities, whether through minor adaptations like open-ended questions or through structured group tasks. This suggests a broader shift in teaching practices from rigid grammar-based instruction to approaches that emphasize communication and student engagement. As Fullan (2007) emphasizes, successful implementation is an adaptive process shaped by teacher beliefs, institutional context, and student needs, rather than mere replication of a pedagogical model.

Therefore, CLT is partially implemented in pesantren, with its effectiveness depending on contextual adaptation. While collaborative learning and structured interactive activities show strong alignment with CLT principles, learner autonomy, assessment practices, and teacher-student hierarchies remain challenges. These findings indicate that CLT integration in pesantren requires culturally responsive strategies and careful balancing between communicative goals and institutional expectations.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined the compatibility between Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) principles and the learning culture in Indonesian pesantren, particularly within formal English classrooms. The findings reveal that although CLT and pesantren education stem from distinct educational paradigms, they share certain underlying pedagogical values that allow for meaningful integration. CLT, with its focus on learner-centered instruction, meaningful communication, and interactional competence, contrasts with the more traditional, teacher-centered, and discipline-oriented practices prevalent in pesantren. Yet, both systems emphasize collaborative learning, the development of practical skills, and engagement within structured social contexts. The study indicates that the successful implementation of CLT in pesantren requires careful consideration of the cultural, institutional, and pedagogical realities inherent in these schools. While CLT cannot be transplanted wholesale into the pesantren environment, its core principles can be adapted to align with the values, routines, and expectations of students, teachers, and administrators. This finding underscores the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy, which recognizes that the efficacy of teaching methods is contingent on local educational traditions, student behaviors, and institutional norms (Gay, 2018; Holliday, 1994).

One of the key insights from this research is that communal learning practices in pesantren naturally complement several aspects of CLT. In pesantren classrooms, students routinely engage in collaborative group work, discussion circles, and peer-assisted learning, which provide a solid foundation for communicative activities. Practices such as group discussion fosters an environment in which learners are accustomed to sharing ideas, negotiating meaning, and cooperating to solve problems—core principles of CLT (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Small-group discussions, pair work, and student presentations not only encourage active participation but also help reduce communication anxiety, promote peer scaffolding, and facilitate the practical use of English in meaningful contexts. These elements demonstrate that pesantren students, despite their traditional schooling background, are capable of adapting to more interactive, participatory learning models when teachers design activities that draw upon familiar cultural practices. Furthermore, the communal ethos of pesantren, which emphasizes mutual support and collective

responsibility, aligns with CLT's emphasis on collaboration and social interaction, thereby providing an inherently supportive environment for communicative pedagogy.

Despite these points of convergence, several challenges limit the full realization of CLT in pesantren settings. One notable challenge is the limited development of learner autonomy, as students are accustomed to highly structured routines and rely heavily on teacher guidance. This reliance constrains spontaneous interaction and independent problem-solving, which are essential for meaningful communicative exchanges. Additionally, the hierarchical relationship between teachers and students often restricts participation in open-class discussions, as students may hesitate to speak without explicit permission or guidance. Pesantren curricula, which often balance English instruction with religious studies, may also prioritize exam-oriented and accuracy-focused learning, reducing opportunities for authentic communication and experimentation with language. Practical constraints, such as limited teaching resources, large class sizes, and time restrictions, further complicate the consistent application of CLT strategies. These challenges echo previous studies in Indonesian and other non-Western EFL contexts, which highlight the tension between communicative ideals and deeply entrenched educational traditions (Chang & Suparmi, 2020; Alharbi, 2021).

Nevertheless, the study finds that CLT can be successfully adapted to the pesantren context through culturally responsive and contextually sensitive strategies. Teachers who gradually introduce student responsibility, scaffold communicative tasks, and frame activities within familiar routines can foster greater learner engagement while maintaining classroom discipline. Encouraging teachers to act as facilitators rather than strict authority figures allows for a participatory learning environment that does not compromise the hierarchical and moral structures valued in pesantren education. Moreover, linking English learning to socially, academically, and morally relevant contexts enables students to see the practical and ethical significance of communication, thereby enhancing motivation and meaningful participation. When communicative activities are aligned with communal and cooperative values, students can engage actively while respecting cultural norms, demonstrating that CLT principles are not inherently incompatible with pesantren traditions. Ultimately, this study suggests that a hybrid pedagogical model, which harmonizes communicative language learning with pesantren values, can support both the development of English proficiency and the preservation of the school's cultural and moral identity, offering a practical roadmap for effective language instruction in Islamic educational settings.

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