

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
EDUCATION, PSYCHOLOGY
AND COUNSELLING
(IJEPC)

<https://gaexcellence.com/ijepc>



ENGLISH PROFICIENCY IN KELANTANESE ISLAMIC SCHOOLS: AN OVERVIEW OF CHALLENGES, STRENGTHS, AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

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Article Info:

Article history:

Received date: 22.01.2026

Revised date: 05.02.2026

Accepted date: 27.02.2026

Published date: 17.03.2026

To cite this document:

Muhammad, N. F., & Tuan Kechik, T. S. M. L. (2026). English Proficiency in Kelantanese Islamic Schools: An Overview of Challenges, Strengths, And Pedagogical Implications. *International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counselling*, 11(62), 1025-1039.

Abstract:

This study examines the current state of English proficiency within the specialized educational context of Kelantanese Islamic schools in Malaysia. Despite national efforts to align English language education with international standards such as the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), significant proficiency gaps persist among learners in religious-based institutions. Guided by the PRISMA 2020 and PCC frameworks, this study synthesized 10 high-quality empirical articles published between 2020 and 2026 to identify the primary factors influencing language outcomes and the efficiency of contemporary pedagogical interventions. The findings reveal that learners consistently demonstrate weaknesses in listening, writing, and foundational literacy, largely attributed to systemic barriers such as a 'crowded curriculum' that prioritizes religious studies and a lack of authentic communicative exposure. However, the results also highlight the transformative potential of structured pedagogical scaffolding, specifically genre-based writing, and the strategic integration of Educational Technology (EdTech), including generative AI and cloud-based multimedia tools, to foster learner autonomy and linguistic immersion. The study concludes that improving English proficiency in these institutions requires a multifaceted approach that aligns school-based assessment with national benchmarks while adopting context-sensitive, technology-assisted instruction. These insights provide a critical roadmap for educators and policymakers to enhance the academic mobility and global employability of students within the Islamic educational ecosystem.

DOI:10.35631/IJEPC.1162060 **Keywords:**

Curriculum Alignment, English Proficiency, Instructional Challenges, Kelantanese Islamic Schools, Pedagogical Interventions.



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Introduction

English has long occupied a central position within the Malaysian education system due to its function as an international lingua franca and its role in facilitating academic advancement, global communication, and economic participation. Despite having done countless efforts, English proficiency levels among Malaysian learners remain uneven, with notable disparities observed across regions, school types, and socio-educational contexts. In recent years, national education reforms have emphasised the importance of developing communicative English competence aligned with international benchmarks such as the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), reflecting the growing demand for graduates who are linguistically prepared for higher education and employment (Baharum et al., 2021; Husin & Radzuan, 2021). Nevertheless, despite sustained policy attention and curriculum reforms, English proficiency outcomes among Malaysian learners remain uneven, with marked variations across geographical regions, school types, and socio-educational contexts.

Learners in rural areas and religious-based institutions, in particular, continue to experience considerable challenges in achieving functional English proficiency. Research has consistently shown that students in these setting often demonstrate weaker performance in listening, writing, and communicative skills compared to their peers in urban or mainstream schools (Ismail & Abdullah, 2020). These disparities raise concerns about educational equity and the long-term readiness of such learners to participate in higher education and the global workforce.

Kelantanese Islamic schools represent a distinctive educational context within Malaysia. Operating under state or private religious authorities, these schools aim to provide holistic education by integrating Islamic studies, Arabic language instruction, and national academic subjects, including English. While this dual-focused curriculum reflects important religious and cultural values, persistent concerns have been raised regarding comparative lower English proficiency levels among students in Islamic schools relative to national benchmarks (Hashim & Yunus, 2018; Norzaidi et al., 2021). Recent empirical studies indicate that students in these settings often exhibit persistent weaknesses in listening comprehension, writing accuracy, and oral communication skills (Abdullah et al., 2023; Muhammad et al., 2024; Sahidan et al., 2025). These proficiency gaps are frequently attributed to limited exposure to authentic English input, constrained instructional time, and pedagogical practices that prioritise examination performance over communicative language use (Ag-Ahmad et al., 2023; Abdullah et al., 2023).

However, the struggle to bridge the proficiency gap in religious and rural settings is not merely a local issue; it reflects a broader global educational challenge in under-resourced or specialized environments. Globally, the integration of innovative digital tools, such as generative AI and cloud technologies, is being explored to create transformative learning experiences (Papadakis et al., 2024). Just as local teachers in Kelantan grapple with curriculum-assessment misalignment, educators worldwide face similar hurdles in balancing traditional instructional values with the rapid adoption of Educational Technology (EdTech) (Uğraş et al., 2024). Recent global perspectives highlight that teacher readiness and digital innovation are critical factors when adopting innovative STEM and language tools to ensure they complement existing pedagogical values.

In light of increasing globalisation and the glowing importance of English for academic mobility, employability, and social participation, addressing English proficiency challenges in Kelantanese Islamic schools has become both timely and essential. Accordingly, this article provides a critical overview of English proficiency within this context through a synthesis of recent empirical literature. By situating the Kelantanese experience within this global discourse, the article examines prevailing patterns of learner performance, identifies key instructional and systemic constraints, highlights emerging strengths, and discusses pedagogical implications aimed at enhancing English language teaching and learning in Kelantanese Islamic schools.

Objective of the Study

The objectives of this study are threefold. First, it seeks to examine the general level of English proficiency among students in Kelantanese Islamic schools as reported in recent literature. Second it aims to identify key instructional, environmental, and systemic factors that influence learners' English language development in this context. Finally, the study explores pedagogical and technological approaches that have demonstrated potential in improving English proficiency among learners in rural and religious-based educational settings.

Literature Review

CEFR And National Efforts to Benchmark English Proficiency

Recent Malaysian scholarship highlights efforts to align local proficiency measures with international frameworks such as the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). Baharum et al. (2021) examined how a Malaysian university correlated its internal English competence scores with a CEFR-aligned test, revealing only a weak-to-moderate positive correlation and underscoring the complexity of benchmarking local assessment instrument against CEFR bands. Their findings underscore the complexity of benchmarking local assessment instruments against CEFR bands, emphasising that alignment requires continuous curriculum revision and careful mapping of local course outcomes (Baharum, et al., 2021). Such alignment is critical in Islamic school contexts where teaching practices may not yet fully reflect the communicative focus implied by national roadmaps (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2021).

Listening And Writing Challenges in Malaysia Contexts

Recent research identifies listening and productive skills as recurrent problem areas in local classrooms, with many Kelantanese Islamic school students demonstrating persistent weaknesses in listening comprehension and writing accuracy (Abdullah et al., 2023; Muhammad et al., 2024). These challenges are not isolated to the Malaysian context but are mirrored in global studies concerning language acquisition in specialized settings. For instance, global efforts to enhance early literacy emphasize that explicit support, such as phonics instruction, is essential to develop macro-skill development (Zin et al., 2023). Similarly, learners in religious-based schools often rely on specific language learning strategies to overcome speaking and listening barriers, reflecting a need for more targeted pedagogical interventions (Sahidan et al., 2025).

Pedagogical Approaches Effective for Rural and Marginalized Learners

Intervention research among marginalized populations provides evidence for pedagogies tailored to learners' specific contexts. Ganapathy et al. (2022) found that a genre-based pedagogical approach led to significant gains in descriptive writing performance among rural students compared to process-based method. This structured scaffolding is effective for learners with limited prior exposure to communicative English (Ganapathy et al., 2022). Such local findings align with global trends in 'Accelerated Education Programs' which propose conceptual frameworks specifically for Tahfiz students to bridge the gap between religious and academic curriculum requirements (Nor et al., 2025).

Digital Innovation and the Role of Educational Technology (EdTech)

The shift toward digital innovation is defining characteristics of contemporary education. Globally, the integration of cloud technologies is recognized for its potential to create transformative learning experiences (Papadakis et al., 2024). In the Kelantanese context, technology-enhanced language learning (TELL) serves as a supplementary pathway for strengthening proficiency where authentic English input is limited (Melvina & Julia, 2021). Recent studies on the use of generative AI, such as ChatGPT, highlight that while these tools offer innovative support for STEM and language education, their success depends heavily on teacher perspectives and readiness (Uğraş et al., 2024). For Islamic schools, integrating such digital resources can foster learner autonomy and provide the repeated exposure necessary for proficiency gains (Melvina & Julia, 2021; Uğraş et al., 2024).

Teacher beliefs and Continuous Professional Development

Teacher capacity remains a central determinant of student outcomes. Studies indicate that teachers believe in explicit instructional strategies, such as phonics, they yield better literacy results (Zin et al., 2023). However, many ESL teachers in less-resourced or religious schools feel constrained by heavy workloads and exam-oriented syllabi (Ag-Ahmad et al., 2023). Husin and Radzuan (2021) argue for continuous professional development targeting workplace-relevant communicative skills. This need for professional training is echoed globally, where teachers require support to navigate the balance between traditional pedagogy and innovative EdTech solutions (Uğraş et al., 2024).

Technology-Enhanced Learning and Learner Attitudes toward Multimedia

Although the strongest evidence for technology-assisted approaches in Kelantan context could be retrieved back in 2020, recent studies continue to advocate for multimedia and technology as supportive tools for listening and speaking development. Melvina and Julia (2021) reported that learner autonomy relates positively to proficiency gains, suggesting that technology which enables autonomous practice, such as multimedia listening tasks and video composition, can be effective when integrated with pedagogy that fosters self-regulated learning. Ganapathy et al. (2022) also documented positive student responses to structured pedagogies that can readily incorporate digital resources. Husin and Radzuan (2021) emphasise designing interventions that are accessible and locally relevant which are important considerations when introducing TALL solutions in resource-constrained schools.

Furthermore, this local shift toward digital tools is part of a global movement where cloud technologies are used for transformative learning experiences (Papadakis et al., 2024). Recent global perspectives on generative AI, such as ChatGPT, highlight that these tools can offer innovative support for language education, though their success is highly dependent on teacher readiness and pedagogical integration (Uğraş et al., 2024).

Synthesis of Key Themes and Research Gap

Collectively, studies published between 2020 and 2026 reveal several recurring themes relevant to English proficiency in Malaysian religious-school contexts. First, alignment between curriculum, instruction, and assessment remains inconsistent, particularly with regard to communicative language use. Second, communicative and workplace-relevant English skills are increasingly emphasised as essential for employability and lifelong learning (Husin & Radzuan, 2021). Third, structured pedagogical approaches, such as genre-based instruction combined with explicit linguistic support, have been shown to benefit low-proficiency learners, especially those in rural or marginalised contexts (Ganapathy et al., 2022).

In addition, foundational literacy skills, including phonological awareness and phonics, continue to be recognised as critical for early reading and writing development (Zin et al., 2023). Technology-enhanced language learning has also been identified as a promising supplementary strategy when adapted to local constraints and learner needs (Melvina & Julia, 2021). Despite these insights, empirical research focusing specifically on Kelantanese Islamic schools remains limited, highlighting the need for further synthesis and context-sensitive analysis. Moreover, situating these local findings within the broader global discourse on Edtech and rural education is necessary to justify the international significance of the study.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design centered on a systematic literature synthesis and thematic analysis. To address the reviewer's requirement for increased methodological transparency and rigor, the study adopts the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework (Page et al., 2021). This structured approach ensures a comprehensive and reproducible process for identifying, screening, and synthesizing literature regarding English proficiency in Kelantanese Islamic Schools (Moher et al., 2009).

Search Strategy and Data Sources

A systematic search was conducted across multiple academic databases, including Mendeley Literature Search, Scopus, Google Scholar, and ResearchGate, covering the period from 2020 to 2026. The search utilized a 'Building Block' approach with Boolean operators to ensure both local depth and global breadth as in Table 1.

Table 1: Systematic Search Strategy and Database Results

Database	Search Strings/ Boolean Queries (2020-2026)	Results
Mendeley Literature Search	("Kelantan*" OR "Malaysia") AND ("Islamic school" OR "Madrasah" OR "Tahfiz" OR "SABK") AND ("English Proficiency" OR "ESL")	15
Scopus	("Pedagogical strategies" OR "Instructional challenges") AND "ESL" AND "Rural" AND ("Malaysia" OR "Global South")	12
Google Scholar	"Digital innovation" OR "EdTech" AND "Teacher perspectives" AND ("ChatGPT" OR "Cloud technologies") AND "Language Learning"	10
ResearchGate	"Phonics" AND "Literacy" AND "Malaysian Rural Schools" AND "English Language Teaching"	8
Total (n)		45

Eligibility Criteria (PCC Framework)

To ensure the review remains focused yet theoretically grounded, the PCC (Population, Concept, and Context) framework was applied as recommended for scoping and systematic mapping of literature (Peters et al, 2020).

- Population: Students and educators within Islamic educational institutions (e.g., Tahfiz, Pondok, and SABK (*Sekolah Agama Bantuan Kerajaan*)).
- Concept: Factors influencing English language proficiency, including instructional challenges, systemic constraints, and the role of Educational Technology (EdTech).
- Context: Specifically, focused on the state of Kelantan, Malaysia, while integrating global parallels from similar under-resourced or specialized educational settings (Peters et al., 2020).

Table 2: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Timeframe	Peer-reviewed articles, conference proceedings, reports from 2020-2026	Studies published before 2020.
Focus	Empirical studies on English proficiency, pedagogy, and digital innovation in religious schools.	Purely theological research or non-educational Islamic studies.
Language	English and Bahasa Melayu.	Other languages.

Data Extraction and Synthesis Process

The selection process followed four distinct phases based on the PRISMA 2020 statement (Page et al., 2021).

1. Identification: Gathering initial records from the specified search strings.
2. Screening: Removing duplicates and reviewing titles/abstracts for relevance to the Kelantanese Islamic school context.
3. Eligibility: Full-text assessment to ensure they addressed instructional or systemic implications.
4. Inclusion: Final synthesis of literature, including 2024 – 2026 sources that provide global EdTech perspectives (e.g., Uğraş et al., 2024; Papadakis et al., 2024).

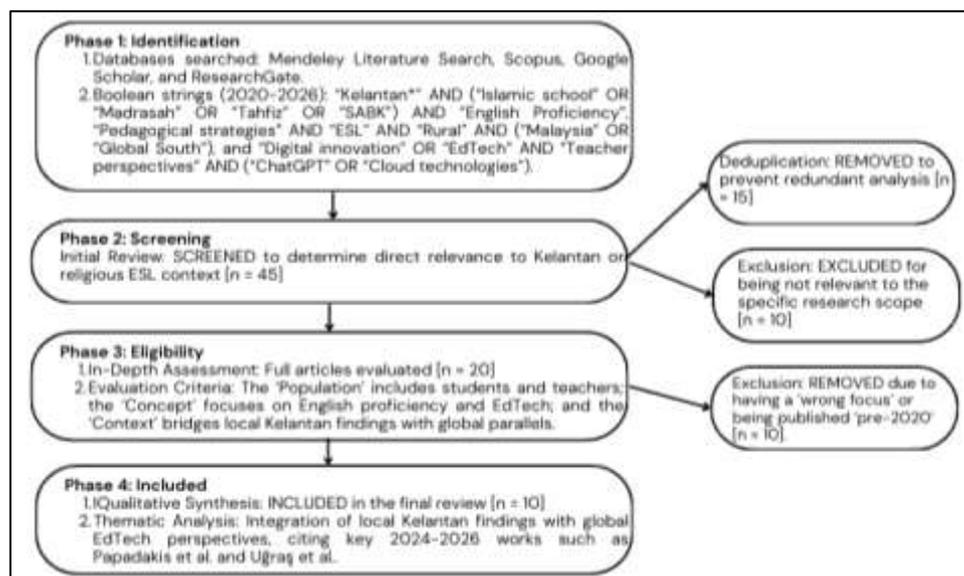


Figure 1: Data Extraction and Synthesis Process Based On PRISMA (Page Et Al., 2021) And PCC (Peters Et Al., 2020) Frameworks

Findings and Results

Based on the systematic data extraction and synthesis process outlined in Figure 1, which adheres to the PRISMA and PCC frameworks, the following findings and results have been meticulously synthesized from the 10 included articles published between 2020 and 2026.

Thematic analysis of the selected literature reveals a complex interplay between traditional curriculum requirements and the evolving digital landscape in Kelantanese Islamic schools. The findings are categorized into five critical dimensions of English language education in this specialized context.

Proficiency Levels and Skill Weakness

The synthesis of recent empirical literature reveals a recurring pattern of limited English competence among students from rural and religious-school backgrounds. Data extracted from perception-based surveys indicate that a significant majority of these learners struggle with

receptive skills, with over 66% reporting difficulties in listening comprehension. Furthermore, more than 70% of students expressed low confidence in writing comfortably, highlighting persistent weaknesses in foundational literacy and grammar. These deficiencies are compounded by a limited vocabulary breadth, which hinders both comprehension of academic texts and the ability to express ideas fluently. This ‘authenticity gap’ – the lack of exposure to real-world English – ultimately reduces students’ communicative readiness for higher education and the global market.

Instructional and Environmental Factors

Systemic constraints within the Islamic school ecosystem significantly impede proficiency gains. One of the most prominent factors is the ‘crowded curriculum’, where the heavy prioritization of religious subjects and Arabic instruction often results in insufficient contact hours for English. This reduction in instructional time leads to a lack of practice and immersion, making it difficult for students to move beyond basic literacy. Additionally, a notable misalignment exists between school-based assessment practices and national proficiency benchmarks such as the CEFR. This misalignment, combined with high syllabus requirements, often forces teachers to adopt examination-oriented, teacher-centered methods that focus on the rote memorization rather than communicative competence.

Student Attitudes and Learning Preferences

Despite the systemic challenges, the research highlights that learners respond positively when provided with structured and contextually adapted pedagogical frameworks. For instance, quasi-experimental evidence demonstrates that genre-based pedagogical approaches significantly improve descriptively writing scores and learner motivation among students starting from low proficiency baselines. Students express a clear preference for visually rich, scaffolded, and guided learning materials that offer a clear structure for organization. These findings suggest that while proficiency may be low, learners possess high potential for improvement when instructional methods are adapted to their specific cognitive and cultural needs.

Teacher Beliefs and Capacity

Teacher-related factors are critical determinants of learner outcomes in the Kelantanese context. Qualitative insights into teachers’ perspectives reveal that many ESL educators in religious schools feel constrained by heavy workloads and a lack of resources, which leads to inconsistent implementation of foundational literacy strategies like phonics. Furthermore, there is a reported lack of specialized continuous professional development (CPD) focusing on CEFR-aligned teaching and communicative pedagogy. When teachers are supported with training in child-centered and explicit instructional strategies, they yield better results in early literacy development, yet systemic pressures often prioritize exam results over these effective practices.

Technology-Enhanced Language Learning (TELL)

Technology-assisted approaches have emerged as a vital supplementary pathway for strengthening English proficiency, especially where authentic input is limited. Multimedia resources that enable autonomous practice, such as video composition and digital listening

tasks, have been shown to relate positively to proficiency gains by fostering self-regulated learning. In the time-constrained environment of Islamic schools, digital tools help extend learning beyond the formal timetable and diversify the types of language input students receive. Recent global parallels from 2024-2026 further emphasize that innovative tools like generative AI and cloud technologies can create transformative, immersive experiences that compensate for the lack of a traditional English-speaking environment.

Table 3 summarised the five dimensions of English language education with its primary findings and key influencers.

Table 3: Summary of Results

Dimensions	Primary Findings	Key Influencers
Learner Profile	Consistent weaknesses in listening and writing.	Limited vocabulary; low authentic exposure.
Systemic Factors	Insufficient contact hours; assessment misalignment.	Religious subject prioritization; exam-oriented routines.
Pedagogical Preference	Positive response to video-based and genre-based instruction.	Visually rich, scaffolded materials.
Teacher Status	Need for continuous professional development (CPD).	Workload; lack of CEFR-specific training.
Technology Role	Supplementary pathway for exposure and practice.	Multimedia resources; generative AI integration.

Discussion

The execution of systematic literature review has provided a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing English proficiency in Kelantanese Islamic schools and the potential of contemporary pedagogical and technological interventions.

Systemic Barriers and the Curriculum-Assessment Misalignment

The findings reveal a profound relationship between systemic instructional gaps and students' English language outcomes. Persistent weaknesses in listening, writing and foundational literacy skills are directly linked to insufficient instructional hours and a lack of authentic communicative exposure. In the distinctive context of Kelantanese Islamic schools, the strong emphasis on religious subjects and Arabic instruction often reduces the temporal and cognitive space available for English practice. While this prioritization reflects core institutional and cultural values, it advertently limits meaningful language use beyond the classroom, leading students to perceive English as a rigid academic subject rather than a functional tool for a communication.

This situation mirrors broader systemic issues reported in Malaysian higher education, where a partial alignment with international frameworks like the CEFR has resulted in inconsistent proficiency development across different educational tiers (Baharum et al., 2021). These systemic issues suggest that low proficiency is not necessarily a reflection of learner ability but is significantly shaped by structural and pedagogical constraints within the educational setting. This aligns with prior research indicating that institutional factors, such as heavy workloads

and examination-oriented syllabi, often constrain teachers from providing meaningful communicative practice (Ag-Ahmad et al., 2023).

Pedagogical Resilience and the Strategic Role of Scaffolding

Despite the aforementioned barriers, this study highlights significant strengths in learner response to specific instructional frameworks. The positive reception of structured, genre-based writing approaches confirms that explicit, scaffolded instruction can effectively enhance language outcomes for learners with limited prior exposure (Ganapathy et al., 2022). This pedagogical strategy, which combines awareness-raising with linguistic support, addresses specific organizational and confidence issues, mirroring international trends where structured approaches benefit marginalized contexts by combining awareness with scaffolding for linguistic forms.

Furthermore, the identified need for improved phonics and foundational literacy instruction supports recent findings that teacher beliefs and consistent phonics practices are crucial determinants of early literacy (Zin et al., 2023). Research on Islamic-based learners indicated that reduced exposure to English outside formal instruction significantly affects learners' vocabulary development and listening comprehension (Sahidan et al., 2025). By shifting toward evidence-based interventions like genre-based writing and phonics-focused teaching, Islamic schools can provide the necessary scaffolding to help students navigate their low proficiency baselines.

Global Parallels and the Digital Transformation

The challenges identified in Kelantan are part of a broader global educational struggle in under-sourced or specialized environments where educators must navigate modern language requirements within traditional curricula (Uğraş et al., 2024). Globally, the shift toward digital innovation is recognized for its potential to create transformative learning experiences (Papadakis et al., 2024). The rapid adoption of Educational Technology (EdTech), including cloud technologies and generative AI (e.g., ChatGPT), is being utilized to provide the immersive linguistic exposure that traditional classrooms often lack (Uğraş et al., 2024).

As identified in the findings, technology-enhanced language learning (TELL) serves as a vital supplementary pathway for strengthening proficiency by fostering learner autonomy and allowing for repeated practice (Melvina & Julia, 2021). The success of these digital integrations, however, is heavily on teacher readiness and the ability to align innovative tools with local instructional values (Uğraş et al., 2024). For Kelantanese Islamic schools, where formal contact hours are constrained, digital tools offer a means to extend learning time and diversify the types of language input students receive.

Implications for Future Practice and Policy

Collectively, these findings reinforce the urgent need for context-sensitive, evidence-based interventions to support sustainable English proficiency development in Kelantanese Islamic schools. Effective improvement requires a multifaceted approach.

- In generating curriculum coherence, it is best to strengthen curriculum-assessment so that it will match the national benchmarks and international frameworks as the CEFR.
- For communicative practice, opportunities for meaning communicative practice should be increased within the classroom to move beyond exam-oriented routines.
- As for professional development, providing continuous training that equips teachers with strategies must be suitable for culturally and linguistically specialized environments (Husin & Radzuan, 2021).
- The idea of digital integration can be executed by incorporating technology-assisted learning and autonomy-supportive practices that are locally relevant and accessible (Melvina & Julia, 2021).

Thus, by balancing religious educational goals with the demands of contemporary English language learning, these institutions can better prepare their students for the academic and professional demands of a globalized market.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper underscores that English proficiency in Kelantanese Islamic schools is influenced by a complex nexus of systemic, pedagogical, and environmental factors. The research synthesis reveals that while learners exhibit persistent weaknesses in listening and writing accuracy, these outcomes are deeply rooted in structural constraints, including a 'crowded curriculum' that prioritizes religious studies, resulting in limited instructional hours for English. Furthermore, a significant misalignment between school-based assessment and national CEFR-aligned benchmarks often traps instruction in teacher-centered examination-oriented routines.

However, the findings, also highlight critical pathways for improvement. For instance, explicit, genre-based instruction and phonics-focused literacy support are identified as highly effective strategies for bridging the proficiency gap in rural and marginalized contexts. Besides, TELL and generative AI offer transformative potential as supplementary tools to provide the immersive linguistic exposure that traditional classrooms lack. Furthermore, students demonstrate positive attitudes toward multimedia and autonomous practice, suggesting that digital tools can foster the self-regulated learning necessary for proficiency gains.

Ultimately, this study justifies the need for a multifaceted approach. It is to integrate context-sensitive pedagogies with innovative EdTech. This can ensure that learners in religious educational settings are linguistically equipped to participate in the more global market and higher education landscapes.

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- Acknowledgements:** The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to Kolej Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Sultan Ismail Petra (KIAS) for providing the necessary resources and support throughout the course of this research. Special appreciation is extended to colleagues and peers who contributed valuable insights and constructive feedback, which greatly enhanced the quality of this paper.
- Funding Statement:** No funding
- Conflict of Interest Statement:** The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. All authors have contributed to this work and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission to the International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counselling (IJEPC).
- Ethics Statement:** This study did not involve any human participants, animals, or sensitive data requiring ethical approval. The authors confirm that the research was conducted in accordance with accepted academic integrity and ethical publishing standards.
- Author Contribution Statement:** All authors contributed significantly to the development of this manuscript. Nur Farhana Muhammad was responsible for the conceptualization, methodology, and overall supervision of the study. This author also handled data collection, analysis, and interpretation of results. Dr. Tuan Siti Mastazameatun Long Tuan Kechik contributed to the literature review, drafting, and critical revision of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript prior to submission.
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