



## INTERPERSONAL SKILLS IN ENGLISH SPEAKING CLASSROOMS: A SOCIOPRAGMATIC STUDY IN AN INDONESIAN PESANTREN

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### Abstract

This qualitative study explores how interpersonal communication strategies, framed within the concept of “loving pedagogy,” shape the relational dynamics of English-speaking classrooms in an Indonesian Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*). Conducted at Pesantren Luhur Baitul Hikmah in Kepanjen, Malang, the research involved two English teachers and three students (*santri*). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically. Findings reveal that teachers employ culturally situated strategies- such as non-threatening error correction inclusive language, and the framing of English as a tool for collective religious and intellectual purposes- to build psychologically safe learning environments. For instance, teachers consistently used praise –first recasts (e.g., “Good attempt, let’s just adjust the verb form together”) and positioned speaking practice as *ibadah dakwah*, which visibly lowered students’ affective filters. These practices reduce students’ speaking anxiety and enhance their willingness to communicate. The study demonstrates that effective interpersonal pedagogy in this context is deeply interwoven with local ethical and mentorship traditions (*Suhbah*). The results offer a model for culturally responsive language teaching that integrates relational care with pedagogical intentionality, providing practical insights for teacher development in Islamic educational settings.

**Keywords:** Sociopragmatics, Interpersonal Communication, Islamic Boarding School, EFL Anxiety, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

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## INTRODUCTION | مقدمة

Contemporary English language teaching has shifted from a structural focus on grammatical accuracy to a boarder emphasis on communicative competence and relational dynamics. The classroom is increasingly recognized as a sociocultural space where learning emerges through interaction, and the teacher student relationship plays a pivotal role in shaping linguistic development. Research consistently demonstrates that when educators exhibit empathy, approachability, and affirming communication, students experience heightened motivation, greater participation, and reduced language anxiety (Zhang et al., 2020). This paradigm aligns with the concept of “loving pedagogy,” which prioritizes intentional care, emotional safety, and supportive dialogue to foster environments where learners feel secure taking linguistic risks.

Despite growing recognition of relational teaching, much of the existing literature conceptualizes teacher-student dynamics unidirectionally, positioning teachers as active providers of support and students as passive recipients. Contemporary scholarship challenges this model, arguing that classroom interaction is fundamentally co-constructed, with students’

agency, willingness to communicate, and pragmatic responses actively shaping the learning atmosphere (Prasad, 2024). Furthermore, prevailing studies in Indonesia EFL contexts often rely on quantitative surveys that measure the frequency of supportive behaviors or their correlation with achievement scores, inadvertently reducing complex relational practices to standardized checklists (Djiwandono & Ginting, 2025). What remains underexplored is the lived, sociopragmatic reality of how interpersonal strategies are enacted, interpreted, and negotiated within specific cultural and institutional frameworks.

To address this gap, the present study employs a sociopragmatic lens to examine interpersonal communication within the unique ecological setting of an Indonesian Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*). Unlike conventional schools, a *pesantren* integrates academic instruction with spiritual formation and communal living, governed by localized ethical tradition such as *Subhah* (mentorship and companionship) (Jahidin, 2023). These cultural norms profoundly influence communicative expectations, face-saving practices, and the pragmatics of error correction. Investigating how “living pedagogy” is culturally adapted in this context reveals how universal relational principles are localized to align with communal values, religious identity, and hierarchical yet nurturing teacher-student dynamics (Sabatier, 2025).

This study offers three distinct contributions. First, it shifts the analytical focus from unidirectional teacher behaviors to the bidirectional, sociopragmatic negotiation of interpersonal meaning between teachers and *santri*. Second, it contextualized “loving pedagogy” within an Islamic educational framework, demonstrating how relational care is operationalized through culturally embedded practices rather than imported Western models. Third, it provides a qualitative, experience-centered account that moves beyond statistical correlations to reveal the micro-interactions that either alleviate or exacerbate speaking anxiety. Accordingly, this research aims to: (1) examine how English teachers at *Pesantren Luhur Baitul Hikmah* enact relationship-building strategies in speaking classes, and (2) explore how *santri* perceive these strategies and their impact on affective filters and willingness to communicate. By bridging sociopragmatic theory with localized pedagogical practice, the findings will inform culturally responsive teacher training and enrich emotion in language learning research beyond Western-centric paradigms.

## METHOD

## منهج

### Research Design

This study employed an explanatory qualitative research design to explore the role of interpersonal skills in English speaking classrooms from a sociopragmatic perspective. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for examining how individuals interpret social interaction and construct meaning within specific educational contexts (Hatch, 2023). The explanatory orientation of this study aims not only to describe classroom interaction but also to explain how interpersonal behaviors influence students’ emotional experiences and willingness to speak English. To capture these dynamics in real-time, the design was complemented by non-participant classroom observations, allowing for a multi-layered understanding of how relational strategies unfold during actual speaking activities.

### Participants

The research was conducted at *Pesantren Luhur Baitul Hikmah*, a religious educational institution where moral values, respect, and close teacher–student relationships are emphasized.

The participants consisted of two English teachers, Mr. A and Mr. B (pseudonyms). Teacher A has two degrees in philosophy: an S1 from STF Driyarkara Jakarta in 2007 and an M.A. from the University of Queensland Brisbane, Australia in 2010. His proficiency in foreign languages includes English, Arabic, and French. As a young scholar, he was asked to give talks on Islam and philosophy at institutions in the Philippines, the US, Canada, and Germany. He has authored multiple volumes on Western philosophy and Islamic studies. Since 2011, he has taught philosophy and Islamic studies (tafsir or Quranic commentary, kalam science or Islamic theology, dates or sociocultural history of Islam, and Islamic philosophy) at Pesantren Luhur Baitul Hikmah. Teacher B has two degrees: an S1 in English education from PPs UNISMA in 2012 and an S2 in philosophy from PPs Universitas Gajah Mada in 2020. He has a strong background in journalism and works as a professional translator. Since 2014, he has taught introduction to philosophy, epistemology, hermeneutics, cultural studies, and bilingual text analysis at Pesantren Luhur Baitul Hikmah. He is also in charge of supervising students at their Thursday night speech practices.

Three students (santri) were selected: Student 1 (nine years at the pesantren), and Students 2 and 3 (four years each). They were chosen through purposive sampling due to their active participation in interdisciplinary learning and their consistent engagement in English-speaking practices (Sunalini et al., 2024). All three demonstrate strong reading proficiency in Arabic and English, regularly engage with classical Islamic texts, and participate in translation exercises and public speaking forums. While the sample size is small (N=5), this is intentional within the qualitative paradigm, which prioritizes depth, contextual richness, and information-rich cases over statistical generalizability. We acknowledge that this limits broad transferability, but it enables a nuanced, sociopragmatic examination of interpersonal dynamics within this specific educational ecosystem.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected primarily through semi-structured in-depth interviews, supplemented by non-participant classroom observations. The interview method allowed participants to reflect on their experiences, opinions, and emotions regarding interpersonal relationships in English language classes (Mojtahedzadeh et al., 2024). Students' emotional reactions during speaking exercises, teachers' relationship-building techniques, and the perceived impact of classroom relationships on anxiety and self-confidence were explored.

Observation Procedure: Classroom observations were conducted over four weeks during regular English-speaking sessions. A structured observation protocol was used to document teacher-student interaction patterns, error correction strategies, turn-taking behaviors, and non-verbal affective cues. Field notes were recorded immediately after each session to capture contextual nuances that might not emerge in retrospective interviews. All interviews were conducted in a quiet environment within the boarding school, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim (Zhou, 2024).

Triangulation: To enhance validity, this study employed methodological and data source triangulation (Santos et al., 2020). Findings from teacher interviews, student interviews, and observational field notes were cross-verified to identify converging patterns, resolve discrepancies, and minimize single-source bias.

### **Data Analysis**

The interview and observation data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and shared meanings (Lochmiller, 2021). The analysis followed a systematic process: transcription familiarization, initial coding, theme development, and theme refinement. From a sociopragmatic perspective, coding specifically targeted how interpersonal skills were linguistically and pragmatically realized (e.g., politeness strategies, face-saving acts, inclusive framing, affective positioning) and how these practices mediated students' emotional engagement and willingness to communicate.

**Trustworthiness:** To ensure methodological rigor, the study adhered to Lincoln and Guba's trustworthiness criteria (Enworo, 2023). Credibility was established through member checking, where participants reviewed preliminary themes for accuracy. Dependability and confirmability were maintained via an audit trail documenting all analytical decisions, and peer debriefing with qualitative research experts. Transferability was supported through thick, contextualized descriptions of the pesantren setting and interactional practices.

**Ethical Considerations:** The study obtained formal institutional approval and written informed consent from all participants. Pseudonyms were used to protect identities, participants were assured of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty, and all digital data were encrypted and stored securely with access restricted to the research team.

## RESULT | نتائج

This section presents the finding of the study based on thematic analysis of interview data from teachers and students. The analysis followed the six-phase procedure proposed by Nowel (Nowell et al., 2025).

**Table 1. Thematic Matrix of Interpersonal Strategies and Sociopragmatic Functions**

Main Theme	Sub Theme	Key Interpersonal strategy	Sociopragmatic/Intercultural Link	Illustrative Quote
Strategy of Interpersonal Communication Building	Culturally Situated Concern	Moral Framing & ideological reassurance	Protection of positive face within hierarchical <i>adab</i> norms	"Their guidance isn't just about words; it's about safeguarding our understanding." (Student 1)
	Non-Threatening Language Practice	Delayed correction, code-switching, co-annotation	Mitigation of Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) via negative politeness	"We don't stop them mid-sentence. We note it, then revisit it together." (Teacher B)
	Dual nature of speaking anxiety	Meaning first framing, contextual scaffolding	Pragmatic reframing of anxiety as productive discipline	"I was scared of ruining the meaning, but his patience taught me to breathe first." (Student 3)
Culturally & Ethically Situated Communication	Interpersonal Alignment & WTC	Inclusive pronoun, linguistic convergence	Interactional sociolinguistic & communicative alignment	"When he switches to English, we follow it feels like we're building it together." (Student 2)
	English for collective purpose	Ideological positioning, communal goal setting	Critical language awareness & sociopragmatic motivation	"English is our bridge to explain Islam accurately to the world." (Teacher A)

### Strategies of interpersonal communication building

#### *Interpersonal Skills as Culturally Situated Concern*

The first communication strategy employed by the teacher is interpersonal skill as a culturally situated concern as the teachers consistently emphasized that English teaching in the

Islamic boarding school is inseparable from religious and ethical values. One teacher stated, “Our Sunni tradition (Ash’ari theology) shapes everything. We frame English as a neutral tool to explain Islam’s balanced view on humanity and to counter both extremism and Islamophobia.” Another teacher highlighted the caring and protective dimension of interpersonal communication by explaining, “Students know we never shame vocabulary gaps. We co-create dual-language annotations instead. A student reflected, “Their guidance isn’t just about words, it’s about safeguarding our understanding.”

From a sociopragmatic perspective, this strategy functions as a form of positive facework (Brown & Levinson, 1987), where teachers validate students’ intellectual and moral identity before addressing linguistic form. Unlike Western “affective closeness,” care here is expressed through *adab* (ethical respect) and ideological reassurance which align with intercultural face-negotiation theory in high-context, collectivist settings (Ting-Tommey, 2005). The hierarchical yet nurturing dynamic allows students to build confidence without violating institutional norms of respect.

### ***Trust-Building through Non-Threatening Language Practices***

The second strategy is trust-building through non-threatening language practice. Teachers explained that creating a comfortable speaking environment involves responding to linguistic errors in supportive, non-punitive ways. Rather than highlighting mistakes publicly, they treat vocabulary gaps as natural learning steps. “We don’t stop them mid-sentence. We note it, then revisit it together,” explained Teacher B. Students reported feeling supported when teachers demonstrated flexibility, such as allowing Indonesian responses followed by collaborative English translation. “When I didn’t know the word, he’d let me say it in Indonesian, then we’d build the English version side by side. It felt like teamwork, not a test.” shared Student 2.

These practices systematically mitigate Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs). Public correction threatens students’ negative face (autonomy/competence), whereas delayed correction, code-switching, and co-construction function as negative politeness strategies. By deprioritizing immediate accuracy, teachers lower the sociopragmatic cost of participation, which directly enhances students’ Willingness to Communicate (WTC) (MacIntyre, et al., 1998).

### ***The Dual Nature of Speaking Anxiety***

The third aspect is the dual nature of speaking anxiety, emerging from the tension between linguistic accuracy and emotional comfort. Teachers acknowledged that speaking tasks involving Qur’anic or philosophical content demand high precision, which can heighten anxiety. However, they emphasized prioritizing students’ ideas before linguistic refinement. “I was terrified of misrepresenting the verse, but his patience taught me to focus on meaning first, form later,” noted Student 3. Over time, students reported that initial self-consciousness diminished, replaced by more automatic participation.

Sociopragmatically, anxiety here operates not merely as an affective barrier but as pragmatic vigilance—a heightened awareness of contextual appropriateness in religious discourse. Teachers reframe this vigilance into productive discipline through meaning-first scaffolding, which aligns with Vygotskian sociocultural theory and pragmatically reduces the affective filter without compromising academic rigor. This balance demonstrates context-sensitive interpersonal competence.

## **Culturally and Ethically Situated Interpersonal Communication**

### ***Interpersonal Alignment and Willingness to Speak***

Teachers described relationship-building as collaborative positioning, where English is framed as a shared communicative task rather than an individual performance. By using inclusive language, they encourage students to perceive speaking as joint effort. “when he switches to English, we follow. It feels like we’re building it together, not performing for him,” explained student 2. Conversely, when teachers reverted to Indonesian, students often did the same, indicating strong interactional mirroring.

This pattern reflects interactional alignment and linguistic convergence (Giles, 1973). The teacher’s language choice operates as a sociopragmatic cue that signals inclusion and shared responsibility. Willingness to speak is thus co-constructed through reciprocal pragmatic signaling positioning English not as an individual deficit area but as a relation practice embedded in communal participation.

### **Culturally and Ethically Situated Interpersonal Communication**

#### ***Interpersonal Alignment and Willingness to Speak***

The first form of culturally and ethically situated interpersonal communication observed in this study is interpersonal alignment in speaking activities. Teachers described relationship-building as a collaborative positioning in classroom interaction, where English is framed as a shared communicative task rather than an individual performance. By using inclusive language that emphasizes collective responsibility, teachers encourage students to perceive speaking English as a joint effort grounded in shared purposes. This interpersonal alignment increases students' willingness to speak, as English is positioned not solely as an academic requirement but as a meaningful tool connected to broader cultural and ethical concerns within the Islamic boarding school context. Students reported that their willingness to speak English was strongly influenced by their teachers' language choices during classroom interaction.

When teachers consistently used English, students were more inclined to respond in English, whereas a shift to Indonesian by the teacher often prompted students to do the same. This pattern indicates that teachers' language practices play a significant role in shaping students' participation and willingness to engage in English speaking activities. These findings demonstrate that willingness to speak is interactionally constructed through interpersonal alignment, where shared language choice functions as a sociopragmatic signal of inclusion and joint responsibility. Such alignment not only shapes students' immediate speaking behavior but also reinforces a sense of collective engagement, positioning English speaking as a relational practice rather than an individual performance.

#### **English as a Means for Collective Purposes**

Teachers framed English learning a form of social and moral responsibility through translation and academic writing. English is positioned as a tool to address misrepresentations of Islam and contribute to broader intellectual discourse. “English is our bridge to explain Islam accurately to the world. It’s not just a subject, it’s an amanah (trust),” asserted teacher A. student echoed this, viewing English as a means to access meanings closer to original Arabic text and fulfill ethical scholarly commitments. This framing transcended instrumental or integrative motivation, operating instead as sociopragmatic empowerment. By linking language use to communal identity and ideological clarity, teachers activate what intercultural communication scholar term critical language awareness (Fairclough, 1995). English becomes a pragmatically charged medium for ethical advocacy, transforming speaking tasks into meaningful social practice and sustaining long-term engagement.

## DISCUSSION

## مناقشة

This study shows that Pesantren Luhur Baitul Hikmah's approach to fostering relationships extends beyond cordial "teacher-student" exchanges. English teaching practice here is a unique integration of loving pedagogy and indigenous pesantren ethical traditions. The discussion below implicates how these interpersonal strategies function not merely as classroom management techniques, but as sociopragmatically calibrated practices that reduce speaking anxiety, reframe L2 motivation, and align language learning with culturally embedded moral frameworks.

### **Subhan as Culturally Embedded Loving Pedagogy: The Psychological and Pragmatic Mechanisms**

The first finding demonstrates that teachers employ collaborative scaffolding by consistently using inclusive pronoun (we/kita) and avoiding punitive linguistic barriers. In positive psychology literature, this aligns with the loving pedagogy framework (Wang et al., 2022), which emphasizes teacher empathy and emotional scaffolding. However, in the pesantren context, loving pedagogy is culturally actualized through the traditional of Subhan (mentorship-based companionship), where teachers function not only as instructors but as moral and intellectual guides.

Psychologically, Subhan operates as a secure relational base where teachers' consistent moral modeling and non-judgmental presence lower the affective filter (Ramzan & Muhammad, 2025). Sociopragmatically, this manifests as positive politeness: teachers validate students' in-group identity and intellectual worth before addressing linguistic form. By positioning themselves as co-learners ("We will explain this to the Western world together"), teachers protect students' positive face (desire to be valued) while mitigating negative face threats (fear of public correction). This dual face-protection mechanism explains why speaking anxiety diminishes: students perceive errors not as personal failures but as shared, culturally sanctioned steps in a guided learning journey. This finding extends working on teacher care and WTC by demonstrating how indigenous mentorship traditions systematically recalibrate the sociopragmatic cost of participation.

### **Reconstructing Motivation: English as a "Weapon for Justice" and Intercultural Reframing**

This phenomenon expands conventional L2 motivation theory. Students are driven not by traditional integrative or instrumental motives, but by a Sociocultural ideal L2 Self (Henry & Liu, 2023), where English proficiency is intertwined with religious identity and ethical agency. From an intercultural communication perspective, this decouples English from Western cultural imperialism and re-anchors it in Islamic epistemic sovereignty. By engaging students in translating classical texts (Kitab Kuning) into English, teachers transform language practice into an act of critical intercultural advocacy (Manan, 2020). This ideological alignment sustains long-term willingness to communicate, as students view speaking not as performance anxiety but as moral responsibility—a finding that extends EFL anxiety research by demonstrating how purpose-driven meaning-making can cognitively reframe affective barriers.

### **Sociopragmatic Competence: Balancing Sacred Precision and Philosophical Freedom**

The third finding highlights teachers' context-sensitive corrective feedback: strict accuracy for sacred texts (Qur'an/Hadith) and flexibility for philosophical discourse. This duality reflects high sociopragmatic intelligence, where teachers navigate linguistic precision according to the pragmatic demands of each speech domain. From a sociopragmatic lens, this practice

demonstrates mastery of contextual appropriateness (Ed-deraouy & Sana, 2024). In Qur'anic paraphrasing, strictness functions as ritual facework, honoring the sanctity of religious discourse and reinforcing adab (ethical respect). Conversely, in philosophical discussions, tolerance for grammatical deviation operates as off-record politeness, prioritizing idea flow over form and preserving students' negative face (autonomy in expression). This calibration reveals that interpersonal effectiveness is not about uniform warmth, but about pragmatic attunement, knowing when to uphold precision as ethical duty and when to allow fluidity as intellectual freedom. Such context-sensitive responsiveness aligns with contemporary views of sociopragmatic competence as dynamic, situationally adaptive, and culturally embedded (Grieve et al., 2023).

### Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While this study offers nuanced insights into relational pedagogy in Islamic educational contexts, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the single-site design and small purpose sample (N=5) limit statistical generalizability and contextual transferability. Second, reliance on self-reported interview and observational data may introduce recall bias and social desirability effects. Third, the focus on advanced, long-term santri may not reflect the experiences of novice learners or students in non-residential Islamic schools. Future research could employ longitudinal, multi-site designs, incorporate micro-level classroom discourse analysis, and compare sociopragmatic strategies across diverse religious and secular educational settings to test the transferability of these relational models.

## CONCLUSION | خاتمة

This study demonstrated that interpersonal pedagogy in Indonesian pesantren English classrooms transcends conventional teacher-student dynamics by embedding "loving pedagogy" within the indigenous mentorship tradition of *Suhbah*. Rather than importing western relational frameworks, teachers strategically employ culturally calibrated sociopragmatic practices—such as delayed, collaborative error correction, inclusive co-construction, and the ideological framing of English as a tool for *da'wah* and intercultural advocacy. These practices systematically lower affective filters, reframe speaking anxiety as pragmatic vigilance, and sustain students' willingness to communicate by aligning language acquisition with moral purpose and communal identity. The findings confirm that effective relational teaching in faith-based ecosystems is not about uniform warmth, but about pragmatic attunement to local ethical norms, hierarchical yet nurturing rules, and context-sensitive discourse management.

The implications of this model extend beyond classroom management to offer a culturally responsive blueprint for teacher development in Islamic educational contexts. By positioning English as a vehicle for Islamic epistemic sovereignty rather than cultural assimilation, educators can transform speaking tasks from performance-driven anxiety into ethically grounded communicative practice. Curriculum designers and language teacher educators should therefore prioritize mentorship-based training that equips instructors to navigate the sociopragmatic demands of both sacred and secular discourse while fostering students' agency as confident, culturally anchored communicators.

To advance this emerging paradigm, future research should move beyond exploratory qualitative designs and adopt more targeted, multi-method approaches. Specifically, scholars are encouraged to (1) conduct longitudinal studies tracking how sustained exposure to *Suhbah*-informed pedagogy impacts L2 speaking anxiety and willingness to communicate across multiple

academic terms; (2) employ mixed-methods designs that triangulate fine-grained classroom discourse analysis with validated psychometric instruments (e.g., the Foreign Language classroom Anxiety Scale and WTC questionnaires) to quantify the affective and pragmatic outcomes of specific interpersonal strategies; (3) test the transferability of this model through comparative multi-site studies across diverse Islamic educational settings (e.g., non-residential madrasahs, Islamic universities) and secular institutions with strong mentorship cultures; and (4) utilize conversation analysis to map how specific sociopragmatic moves (e.g., praise-first recasts, strategic code-switching) sequentially mitigate face threats in real-time interaction. Ultimately, this research affirms that when interpersonal strategies are culturally grounded and ethically purposeful, language classrooms become sites of relational empowerment. By bridging sociopragmatic theory with localized pedagogical practice, the study offers a replicable pathway for decolonizing language education and cultivating globally competent, locally rooted speakers.

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