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Taboo Language, Guilt, and Islamic Character Education: A Pilot Study of Indonesian Muslim Students

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Abstract. *Taboo language is a recurring challenge in Indonesian Islamic education. Research has described what makes taboo words offensive, but less is known about the moral-emotional burden carried by producers and hearers in Indonesian Muslim educational settings. This pilot study asks whether students report higher guilt when imagining themselves as producers than as hearers, and whether this gives preliminary support to Basthomi's (2010) sin-potential proposition. Twenty-one students of Arabic Language and Literature at UIN Sayyid Ali Rahmatullah Tulungagung (81% female; religiosity M = 4.00 on a five-point scale) completed a within-participants vignette questionnaire using the word "anjing" (dog) across four speaker types: stranger, close friend, young child, and ustadz. Producer guilt (M = 3.905, α = .958) exceeded hearer guilt (M = 3.127, α = .871), Wilcoxon T = 6.5, exact p = .0006, rank-biserial r = .90; 13 of 21 participants scored higher on producer guilt and 3 on hearer guilt. The asymmetry held after excluding careless responses and when the ustadz scenario was added to the hearer side, but on the most parallel item (berdosa, "sinful") it was significant only without the ustadz scenario. Hearer guilt varied by speaker type, while the istighfar difference between roles was not significant (T=20, p=15). Producer guilt did not differ by pesantren background (n = 8 vs. 13, p = .58), though this subgroup is small. Given the fixed presentation order without counterbalancing, the small and predominantly female sample, and non-parallel composites, the findings are preliminary and do not establish that PAI character education should prioritise speaker responsibility. The study contributes role-differentiated moral emotion to research linking taboo language and Islamic character education and calls for counterbalanced pre-post replication.*

Abstrak. Bahasa tabu merupakan tantangan yang berulang dalam pendidikan Islam di Indonesia. Kajian terdahulu telah menjelaskan apa yang membuat ungkapan tabu bersifat menyinggung, tetapi beban moral-emosional yang ditanggung penutur dan pendengar dalam konteks pendidikan Islam di Indonesia masih sedikit diteliti. Studi pendahuluan ini menguji apakah mahasiswa melaporkan rasa bersalah yang lebih tinggi ketika membayangkan diri sebagai penutur dibandingkan sebagai pendengar, dan apakah pola tersebut

memberikan dukungan awal bagi proposisi potensi dosa menurut Basthomi (2010). Dua puluh satu mahasiswa Program Studi Bahasa dan Sastra Arab UIN Sayyid Ali Rahmatullah Tulungagung (81% perempuan; religiusitas M = 4,00 pada skala lima poin) mengisi kuesioner berbasis situasi dengan kata "anjing" pada empat tipe penutur: orang asing, teman dekat, anak kecil, dan ustadz. Rasa bersalah sebagai penutur (M = 3,905, α = ,958) lebih tinggi daripada sebagai pendengar (M = 3,127, α = ,871), Wilcoxon T = 6,5, p exact = ,0006, rank-biserial r = ,90; 13 dari 21 partisipan memiliki skor penutur yang lebih tinggi dan 3 partisipan sebaliknya. Asimetri tetap ada setelah respons yang tidak cermat dikeluarkan dan ketika skenario ustadz dimasukkan pada sisi pendengar. Tetapi pada item yang paling sepadan (berdosa), asimetri signifikan hanya tanpa skenario ustadz. Rasa bersalah pendengar bervariasi menurut tipe penutur, sedangkan selisih istighfar antarperan tidak signifikan (T=20, p=15). Rasa bersalah penutur tidak berbeda menurut latar belakang pesantren (n = 8 vs. 13, p = ,58), meskipun subkelompok ini kecil. Mengingat urutan penyajian yang tetap tanpa penyeimbang, sampel yang kecil dan didominasi perempuan, serta komposit yang tidak sepenuhnya paralel, temuan ini bersifat pendahuluan dan belum membuktikan bahwa pendidikan karakter PAI sebaiknya memprioritaskan tanggung jawab penutur. Studi ini memberikan kontribusi berupa pemetaan emosi moral berbasis peran dalam kajian bahasa tabu dan pendidikan karakter Islam, serta menyerukan replikasi dengan desain pre-post yang seimbang.

A. INTRODUCTION

Taboo language is not a peripheral concern in Indonesian Islamic education. It is a documented, recurring challenge. Islamic education teachers, *madrasah* counsellors, and character education coordinators encounter it across every level of formal schooling, starting from elementary classroom to university lecture hall. Research conducted in elementary settings confirms that verbal bullying and swearing are among the most persistent behavioural challenges addressed through religious habituation, value-based modelling of *akhlak mulia*, and structured parental engagement (Alfaaza et al., 2025; Silvia & Sesmiarni, 2026). At the junior secondary level, negative verbalism that includes taboo language, mockery, and verbal humiliation, has been systematically linked to peer dynamics, social media exposure, various familial upbringing, and inadequate ethical language awareness in both formal *madrasah* and non-formal Islamic institutions (Islami et al., 2026; Syam & Hazairin, 2026).

Senior secondary and university students are not exempt. Among Indonesian high school and university students, taboo expressions drawn from animal terms, body-part references, and character insults remain in active circulation, motivated by emotional expression, peer bonding, and the normalisation of taboo forms through digital platforms (Defina, 2024; Perangin-angin et al., 2022; Sari & Gunawan, 2026). At the global scale, cross-linguistic research spanning seventeen countries and multiple language families confirms that taboo words are perceived as morally loaded and emotionally arousing regardless of cultural setting, though the precise degree of their offensiveness is governed by community-specific religious and social norms (Dewaele, 2018; Sulpizio et al., 2024; Thomas et al., 2019). Within an Indonesian Islamic educational context, these global patterns carry amplified

significance that language is understood here not merely as a social act but as a spiritually accountable one. Besides, students are formally instructed in *adab berbahasa* or the ethics of speech, through the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum from elementary school onwards (Alfaaza et al., 2025; Mukhlis & Cahyadi, 2026). However, there is another perspective that there is a debate on second-language teaching on whether taboo words should be taught to students as the authentic communication (Liyanage et al., 2015) and representing working-class culture (Miller, 2022). Survey-based evidence confirms that Indonesia Muslim university students recognise the inconsistency between taboo language use and Islamic ethical norms, even when the exposure to taboo language remains frequent in colleague interaction (Adadi et al., 2024).

International scholarship on taboo language has produced a substantial body of work focused on what taboo words are and what they do to the speaker. Research has documented their referential categories, their neurological arousal profiles, their emotional force in first versus second languages, and the social functions they serve for those who produce them (Allan, 2019; Beers Fägersten & Stapleton, 2017; Dewaele, 2016; T. B. Jay, 2019). This body of evidence establishes that taboo words are not merely impolite. They activate emotional responses that exceed neutral equivalents in force, particularly in a speaker's first language. Besides, their production is governed as much by relational and contextual factors as by the taboo status of the word itself. What this literature review has been considerably less attentive to, however, is the moral-emotional experience of the two primary participant roles, that are the person who produces taboo language and the person who hears it. These two roles are asymmetric in a fundamental sense: production is an act for which the speaker is a full moral agent while hearing is an event that happens to a person.

If guilt, as the psychological literature establishes as a reactive attitude (McDonald, 2020), is behaviour-oriented and attaches to actions one has performed rather than to events one has witnessed, then the hearer and producer of a taboo utterance had better not be assumed to carry equivalent moral burdens (Tangney et al., 2007). Recent research on guilt and language lends empirical weight to this inference. Kyriakou et al. (2024) demonstrated that bilinguals report significantly higher guilt when processing morally charged scenarios in their first language than in a foreign one. Besides, the use of a greater number of emotional vocabulary items when recounting guilt-laden autobiographical memories in the L1 indicates that guilt in language-embedded moral events is highly sensitive to contextual and role-based factors. The implication is that the distribution of moral guilt across hearer and producer roles in taboo language events is not a settled matter, but instead it is an open empirical question.

Three theoretical frameworks explicate the analytical architecture of the present study under the roof of Sociolinguistics, and their productive tension defines the central research problem. Wijana (2004) classifies Indonesian *makian* (abusive and coarse expressions) into nine referential categories, of which animal terms such as *anjing* (dog) form one class. This taxonomy identifies which expressions qualify as taboo in Indonesian tradition, but it does not address how the speaker and hearer roles differ morally. O'Driscoll (2020) holds that offence is contextually realised. The conventional taboo status of a word, its potential offence, becomes actual offence through the participation framework, the speaker's authority, and the footing among animator, author, and principal (Goffman, 1981). Hearer responses are therefore variable and tied to the institutional identity of the speaker. The offensiveness of the word itself is a necessary but insufficient explanation.

The third framework serving as the analytical centre of the study, Basthomi (2010), moves the analysis from social pragmatics into Islamic moral theology. Basthomi regards the production of harmful or impure speech as a morally consequential act that activates the concept of *dosa* (sin) for the speaker in a way distinct from the hearer's exposure. This

proposition is grounded in *hifz al-lisan* (the Islamic command to guard the tongue) (Hamim, 2021). This proposition frames the act of producing taboo language as a moral failure of the speaking self and a matter of direct religious responsibility, not merely social misconduct (Alfaaza et al., 2025; Basthomi, 2010). Its relevance to *Pendidikan Agama Islam* or *PAI* (Islamic Religious Education) is direct. *Adab berbahasa* is part of the curriculum at school on every level of education, and the pedagogy of speaker responsibility already assumes the proposition. If the producer bears a heavier moral burden, speaker-directed character education is a candidate target for intervention. If the burden is shared or concentrated elsewhere, hearer-oriented support and environmental measures deserve more weight. The proposition therefore bears on how PAI teachers allocate attention between the one who speaks and the one who listens. To our knowledge, there is a limited empirical test of whether that differential burden is reflected in participants' self-reported moral guilt.

When these theoretical debates are brought into the Indonesian educational context, their practical stakes become concrete. Islamic education teachers across school levels have reported that taboo language production is among the most persistent behavioural challenges they address, and the intervention strategies documented in the literature, such as religious habituation, modelling, value-based sanctions, and parental collaboration, are premised on the understanding that the speaker bears moral responsibility (Alfaaza et al., 2025; Syam & Hazairin, 2026). At junior secondary level, where negative verbalism has been linked to imitation of social media content creators who use profanity (Islami et al., 2026), this speaker-accountability framing is challenged by students' passive exposure to taboo language.

At the senior secondary and university levels, students consider swearing a vehicle for emotional expression and peer solidarity, not aggression, a shift in motivation that complicates uniform moral attribution across the hearer and producer roles (Perangin-angin et al., 2022; Sari & Gunawan, 2026). Throughout these educational levels, the Islamic education curriculum governs students' normative understanding of language as spiritually accountable behaviour from childhood through young adulthood (Mukhlis & Cahyadi, 2026). In other words, Islamic education's implicit pedagogy of speaker responsibility which is grounded in *adab berbahasa* theology has not yet been tested against the moral-emotional responses that students themselves report.

Two distinct gaps can be identified at this intersection. The first is empirical: limited studies have directly measured whether Indonesian Muslim students report significantly higher guilt when imagining themselves as producers of taboo language than when positioned as hearers. This is, in Mitchell & Haugh (2015) terms, an unexamined distribution of moral accountability. That is a question about who is construed as the responsible agent in a taboo language event and how that construal translates into self-attributed moral emotion. Indonesian taboo-language studies have remained largely descriptive, documenting referential categories and functional patterns without investigating the moral-emotional responses associated with participant roles (Defina, 2024; Perangin-angin et al., 2022; Sumekto & Kustinah, 2019).

Islamic education research has documented teacher-side strategies without measuring the student-side moral experience those strategies are designed to address (Alfaaza et al., 2025; Syam & Hazairin, 2026). The second gap is theoretical. Sin-potential proposition of Basthomi (2010) has not been subjected to quantitative empirical test. This idea predicts that producers of taboo speech carry a higher moral burden than hearers, grounded in the Islamic theology of speech responsibility. What is absent, at the intersection of Indonesian taboo-language research, Islamic education scholarship, and moral-emotional psychology, is a study that measures guilt across participant roles and assesses whether the observed distribution supports the sin-potential proposition.

This study addresses these gaps through a pilot quantitative investigation of twenty-one Arabic Language and Literature students. This is a community with documented, deep institutional socialisation in *adab berbahasa* and high Islamic religiosity. The study is guided by two directional hypotheses and one exploratory question: H1 (directional): Producer-guilt will significantly exceed hearer-guilt among Indonesian Muslim students socialised in *adab berbahasa;* H2 (directional): Hearer-guilt will vary systematically by speaker type, consistent with Goffman's participation framework; RQ3 (exploratory, educational): If the guilt asymmetry is confirmed, what implications follow for the design of speaker-focused PAI character education interventions?

The present study examines an antecedent condition rather than an educational intervention. Pedagogical accounts of taboo-language management in Islamic religious education presuppose that speakers and hearers differ in how they experience responsibility for the same utterance. Whether that difference exists is an empirical question that must be answered before any decision about where character education should place its emphasis. This study addresses that question in one sample. It does not measure instruction, classroom practice, or teacher behaviour, and it makes no claim about how Islamic religious education produces or fails to produce the pattern reported here.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a quantitative within-participants design to compare self-reported moral guilt across two interactional roles, hearer and producer. Comparing the roles within the same person holds constant individual differences such as baseline religiosity. The design is within-participants and therefore vulnerable to carryover. In this study the four hearer scenarios were presented first, followed by the producer section, in a fixed order that was not counterbalanced. Vignette order was not randomised, and no embedded attention checks were included. The producer–hearer comparison is therefore confounded with presentation order, and the asymmetry cannot be attributed to role alone. Careless responding was screened post hoc through straight-lining and response-pattern checks, which identified two respondents. Their exclusion did not change the main result. The study is explicitly a pilot. Its aim is to assess whether the predicted asymmetry is observable in a high-religiosity context, not to generalise to all Indonesian Muslim students.

The study was conducted within the Arabic Language and Literature programme at UIN Sayyid Ali Rahmatullah Tulungagung. Data were gathered through Google Forms in late 2025 using a 51-item questionnaire in Indonesian. The site was chosen on theoretical grounds, since students in this programme typically have extended socialisation in *adab berbahasa* through *madrasah aliyah* and *pesantren*. The sample comprised 21 students who all gave consent. Seventeen were women and four were men. Mean age was 21.1 years (range 19 to 23). Ten had a *madrasah aliyah* background, eight a *pesantren* background, and three a general senior secondary (SMA) background. The gender composition reflects the cohort, and the study did not sample by gender. This background makes them an ideal population for testing Basthomi's (2010) sin-potential proposition. The sample ($N = 21$) was predominantly female (81%), reflecting actual cohort enrollment rather than sampling bias. While female respondents often report higher baseline guilt in moral-emotional tasks, this demographic profile ensures sustained exposure to Islamic speech ethics.

Data were gathered using a 51-item vignette-based questionnaire in Indonesian. Vignettes avoid the ethical issues of exposing participants to real offensive speech while eliciting moral-emotional responses. The 11-item religiosity scale yielded a high mean ($M = 4.00, SD = 0.63, \alpha = .90$), confirming a homogenous, highly religious sample. Next section presented four narrative vignettes using the animal epithet word *anjing* (dog) across four speaker contexts: a stranger, a close friend, a young child, and an *ustadz*. The word *anjing*

was chosen because animal-category taboos are the most frequent in Indonesian student speech. The term was partially redacted to signal its analytical status. Each scenario evaluated offensiveness, unacceptability, hearer guilt (*berdosa*), moral discomfort, *istighfar* impulse, and regret. The last section captured producer guilt through generalized reflective items. The producer section measured five items: feeling guilty when saying a taboo word, feeling spiritually disgusted when hearing one, feeling sinful when saying one, regret after saying one, and the *istighfar* impulse after an accidental slip

Composite scores were constructed by averaging items. The hearer-guilt composite (M = 3.127, α = .871) combined the *berdosa* items from the stranger, friend, and child scenarios. The *ustadz* scenario was excluded because its additional semantic load concerns institutional betrayal, a decision that was made before the analysis. The producer-guilt composite (M = 3.905, α = .958) averaged three of the five producer items: feeling guilty, feeling sinful, and regret. The disgust item (M = 3.52) and the *istighfar* item (M = 4.10) were excluded from the composite because they measure different constructs. Including all five producer items gives α = .971. An α above .95 for three items may reflect a uniform construct, but it may also reflect redundancy in the wording, and this interpretation is treated with caution in the Results. The two composites differ in construction as well as in content. The hearer composite is built from scenario-specific items and the producer composite from generalised items. The item *berdosa* is the closest parallel across roles, and it is analysed separately as a robustness check. Separately, a scenario composite was computed for each speaker type as the mean of six items (offensiveness, unacceptability, *berdosa*, moral discomfort, *istighfar*, and regret). These scenario composites were used only for the test of H2, and they are reported in Table C.1.

Data analysis proceeded in four stages. First, descriptive statistics were calculated for both composites, together with item-level means and standard deviations for each scenario. Second, distributional assumptions were evaluated with the Shapiro–Wilk test. Producer guilt showed mild non-normality (W = .89, p = .024), whereas hearer guilt did not (W = .96, p = .550). Given this asymmetry and the small sample, the Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used for the paired comparison, with zero differences excluded (Field, 2018). Third, the rank-biserial correlation was calculated as the effect size, and the z-based effect size $r = Z/\sqrt{N}$ was reported separately so that the two are not confused. Fourth, robustness checks were run: exclusion of two respondents whose responses appeared careless (one who gave 5 to all items and one who gave 1 to 30 of 40 items), exclusion of men (n = 4), comparison with the *ustadz* scenario included, comparison on the *berdosa* item alone, and a Friedman test for H2. H2 was tested across the four hearer scenarios on the *berdosa* item and on the scenario composites. Table B.1 presents the descriptive statistics and internal consistency coefficients for both composites and the religiosity scale.

Table B.1 Descriptive statistics and Internal Consistency for the scales

Scale	Items (k)	M	SD	α	Min	Max
Religiosity scale	11	4.00	0.63	.903	2.18	5.00
Hearer-guilt composite	3	3.127	1.15	.871	1.00	5.00
Producer-guilt composite	3	3.905	1.05	.958	1.00	5.00

Source: Primary data processed by the authors (2025)

The higher alpha for the producer-guilt composite (α = .958) compared to the hearer-guilt composite (α = .871) reflects the structural uniformity of the producer items, that converge on a single morally coherent construct. Meanwhile, hearer-guilt items incorporate

planned contextual variance across three qualitatively different speaker-type scenarios.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. The Guilt Asymmetry and Its Contextual Calibration

Producer-guilt composite scores (M = 3.905) were higher than hearer-guilt composite scores (M = 3.127). The Wilcoxon signed-rank test gave T = 6.5, exact p = .0006 (normal approximation Z = −3.18, two-sided p = .0015), with n = 16 non-zero pairs. Five participants gave identical scores on both composites. The rank-biserial correlation was r = .90. The z-based effect size, $Z/\sqrt{16}$, was .80. By conventional benchmarks both indicate a large effect. Of the 21 participants, 13 (61.9%) showed higher producer-guilt scores, 3 (14.3%) showed higher hearer-guilt scores, and 5 (23.8%) showed equal scores. The statistical contrast is the entry point into a further question, namely what the asymmetry means.

The asymmetry held in every check except one. Excluding the two careless respondents left T = 6.5, p = .0006, and rank-biserial r = .90. Restricting the analysis to women (n = 17, 14 non-zero pairs) gave T = 3.0, p = .0006, and r = .94. Including the *ustadz* scenario on the hearer side (M = 3.250) gave T = 13.0, p = .003, and r = .81. The exception is the single item *berdosa*, which is the closest parallel across roles. Producer *berdosa* (M = 3.67) compared with hearer *berdosa* averaged over the stranger, friend, and child scenarios gave T = 12.5 (13 non-zero pairs), p = .021, and r = .73. When the *ustadz* scenario was added to the hearer side, the same comparison gave p = .105. The asymmetry on the most parallel item therefore depends on the decision to exclude the *ustadz* scenario. That decision was made on theoretical grounds, but it is a researcher degree of freedom, and the Discussion treats it as such.

Table C.1 disaggregates hearer-guilt responses across four-type speaker scenarios and presents item-level means alongside scenario composites, providing the empirical basis for the participation-framework analysis that follows.

Table C.1 Item-Level Means and Standard Deviations Across Hearer-Guilt Scenarios

Scale	Stranger		Friend		Child		Ustadz	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Offensiveness (Ofensif)	2.90	1.30	2.76	1.41	3.62	1.32	4.24	1.09
Unacceptability (Tidak pantas)	3.24	1.26	3.57	1.25	4.29	1.27	4.52	0.98
Hearer guilt (Berdosa)	2.76	1.30	2.95	1.47	3.67	1.06	3.62	1.24
Moral discomfort (Terganggu moral)	3.62	1.16	3.81	1.21	4.33	1.02	4.33	1.02
Istighfar impulse	3.57	1.12	3.76	1.14	3.86	1.15	3.95	1.20
Regret (Menyesal)	3.10	1.26	3.14	1.53	4.33	1.24	4.38	1.07
Scenario composite	3.20	1.07	3.33	1.16	4.02	0.98	4.17	0.94

Source: Primary data processed by the authors (2025)

Note that the hearer-guilt composite (3.127) equals the mean of the stranger, friend, and child *berdosa* items (2.76, 2.95, 3.67).

Hearer guilt varied across scenarios, and the test of H2 supports this. On the *berdosa* item, the Friedman test across four scenarios gave $\chi^2(3) = 20.42$, $p < .001$, and the scenario composites gave $\chi^2(3) = 33.94$, $p < .001$. The gradient is not monotonic. Offensiveness is nearly identical for the stranger and friend scenarios (2.90 vs. 2.76), and hearer guilt is slightly lower for the *ustadz* than for the child (3.62 vs. 3.67). The character of hearer guilt also appears to shift. The stranger scenario produces the lowest guilt (M = 2.76) but still

generates considerable moral discomfort (M = 3.62), which suggests that respondents separate personal guilt from general moral unease. In the child scenario the highest ratings are for moral discomfort and regret (both M = 4.33). The regret item "Saya menyesal bahwa anak kecil tersebut mengetahui kata itu" (I regret that the young child knows that word) is among them. This is better read as vicarious distress on the child's behalf than as self-directed condemnation. The *ustadz* scenario shows the sharpest dissociation. Respondents rated unacceptability (M = 4.52) and offensiveness (M = 4.24) very high, while their own guilt was lower (M = 3.62). This pattern fits an account of O'Driscoll (2020), in which the hearer's evaluation depends on the speaker's role and the institutional setting, not only on the word. The test confirms that variation exists. It does not test the specific ordering that O'Driscoll's framework would predict, and the item means alone do not establish that the variation is systematic in the sense H2 intends.

The overall pattern gives directional support to Basthomi's sin-potential proposition which holds that producing dirty words activates the category of sin for the speaker in a way distinct from the hearer's exposure. The producer composite is higher, shows greater internal consistency, and is accompanied by a numerically higher *istighfar* response. Three qualifications apply. First, the presentation order was fixed, so the asymmetry may partly reflect carryover from four hearer blocks. Second, the composites measure different constructs in part, since the hearer composite uses *berdosa* alone, which translates more closely as "sinful" than as "guilty". Third, the single most parallel item supports the asymmetry only when the *ustadz* scenario is excluded. Together these qualifications mean that H1 is supported in the composite comparison but not established. Basthomi's proposition is therefore supported directionally by the composite comparison and is not established by it.

The producer–hearer difference is consistent with the view that guilt is behaviour-focused, attaching to acts one has performed rather than to events one has witnessed (Tangney et al., 2007) and it acts as a signal of someone's moral intentions (Giner-Sorolla et al., 2018). If this view extends to taboo language, the producer and the hearer of an utterance would not be expected to carry equivalent moral burdens. The present sample's high religiosity (M = 4.00, SD = 0.63) makes it a context in which the proposition is sensitive to test, although the restricted range of religiosity in this sample prevents any test of that correlation. The findings therefore distinguish between the two roles without implying that all taboo-language encounters are morally equivalent for Muslim students. The producer appears to be the primary locus of the moral burden, and the hearer appears to be a secondary witness whose response is contextually conditioned.

From a socio-pragmatic perspective, Mitchell & Haugh (2015) argue that the moral weight of a transgression depends on how agency is attributed to the person who performed it. The present data fit this account, but they cannot establish it, because the design does not measure attributions of agency. Work on swearing also locates pragmatic force in the speaker's position within the interaction rather than in the referential content of the word alone (Beers Fägersten & Stapleton, 2017). Taken together, the data show a role asymmetry in self-reported guilt in this sample. They do not show that the asymmetry reflects a moral order specific to this community. Mitchell & Haugh (2015) argue that the moral responsibility attached to language is socially constructed through how agency is attributed within a normative moral order. The data are consistent with that condition for this community. Because the design cannot separate religious belief from shared social norms, the claim that the moral order is religiously grounded remains an interpretation.

The high and homogeneous religiosity in this sample (M = 4.00, SD = 0.63) prevented moderation analysis of the religiosity-guilt relationship, but the pattern of results points to a theoretical distinction. Rather than confirming the simple assumption that higher

religiosity produces higher guilt, the data suggest a more complex picture. It shows that hearer guilt was contextually variable even within a high-religiosity sample, whilst producer guilt was uniformly high and internally coherent. Balkaya-Ince et al. (2025), in their study of 202 Muslim American adolescents aged 13–18, found that guilt declined within-person during Ramadan and rose again after, indicating that active religious practice temporarily moderates rather than simply amplifies guilt responses. This finding challenges the assumption of religiosity as a static predictor of guilt intensity.

Kyriakou et al. (2024) similarly established that the experience of guilt in linguistically charged moral contexts is sensitive to contextual and role-based factors rather than fixed by individual religious commitment. Together, these findings suggest that the religiosity-guilt relationship in Muslim communities is a within-person dynamic rather than a stable trait-level association. This is a distinction with direct methodological implications where studies that recruit only high-religiosity participants cannot fully explicate the moderation function of religious commitment.

2. *Istighfar* as Moral Repair: The Producer-Side Signal

The producer-side *istighfar* item, "Saya biasanya membaca istighfar jika saya tidak sengaja mengucapkan kata tabu" (I usually say istighfar if I accidentally say a taboo word), yielded M = 4.10 (SD = 1.04). Hearer-side *istighfar* responses ranged from M = 3.57 (stranger) to M = 3.95 (*ustadz*), and their mean across scenarios was M = 3.79. The item is the highest of the five producer items, but it is not the highest item in the instrument. The *ustadz* unacceptability item (M = 4.52) and several regret and moral discomfort items (M = 4.33 to 4.38) are higher. The difference between producer and hearer *istighfar* was not significant in a paired comparison of the producer item with the average hearer *istighfar* item (T = 20, p = .15, rank-biserial r = .49, n = 12 non-zero pairs). The producer-side value is therefore numerically higher, but the data do not show that it is reliably higher. The item also does not specify whether the *istighfar* was directed to God, to the hearer, or both, and this ambiguity limits what the response can mean.

Vaish et al. (2016) found that three-year-old children repaired more when they had caused harm themselves than when harm was caused by someone else, which suggests that guilt, as distinct from sympathy, drives reparative behaviour. Donohue & Tully (2019) found that children who were led to feel guilty engaged in more reparative behaviour, and that their guilt decreased after a repair opportunity but not when no repair was offered. Iwai et al. (2023) extend the pattern to adults: transgressors high in moral identity felt guiltier and offered more comprehensive apologies, and guilt mattered most when perceived apology effectiveness was low. Within this framework, *istighfar* can be understood as the verbal and religious form of repair available when a speaker has slipped and no injured party is present to receive an apology. The present data do not test this function, and the single producer item cannot carry the weight of such a mechanism.

Seeking forgiveness is also an interpersonal process with a divine addressee, and this is the dimension that makes *istighfar* distinct from an apology. Witvliet et al. (2020) showed that offender accountability responses, including apology and restitution, shape victim empathy and forgiveness. da Silva et al. (2017) compared rumination about a transgression with forgiveness-seeking imagery and reported distinct cardiac and emotional responses in transgressors, which suggests that the act of seeking forgiveness is itself psychologically consequential. In Islamic thought, *tawbah* is treated as the principal mechanism of atonement, governed by conditions of returning, regret, and amending wrongs (Khalil, 2023). Islah (2026) proposes an integrative model in which repentance has intrapersonal dimensions (guilt, remorse, self-forgiveness), a transpersonal dimension (God-consciousness and ritual), and an interpersonal dimension (apology and reconciliation).

Skalski-Bednarz (2024) found that among religious adults, the stress-reducing effect of self-forgiveness was greatest when forgiveness by God was perceived at high levels, which indicates that the divine addressee may matter for the emotional outcome of seeking forgiveness. None of these studies measures *istighfar* in relation to guilt about speech, but together they make seeking forgiveness from God as a legitimate object of empirical study that the current study's findings try to explain in relation to taboo language.

The emotional force of taboo language helps explain why the producer and hearer roles might differ. Sulpizio et al. (2024) compiled taboo words across 13 languages and 17 countries and found that taboo words are characterised mainly by extremely low valence and high arousal, with substantial cross-country variability in tabooness and offensiveness, which the authors attribute to community-specific sociocultural knowledge. Reilly et al. (2020) found that physiological arousal and emotional valence strongly predicted tabooness in American English. T. Jay (2009) adds that taboo words are defined and sanctioned by institutions of power, including religion, and that prohibitions are reiterated in child-rearing, which offers a plausible route by which religious authority might heighten the offensiveness of taboo words in Indonesian Muslim contexts. Furthermore, Stapleton et al. (2022) reinforce that the power of swearing is not intrinsic to the words themselves but depends on how they are used in interaction, which is consistent with the pragmatic emphasis of the present study. Taken together, the findings of vignette questionnaires suggest that the offensiveness of a taboo word is partly a property of the relation between speaker, context, and norm, and that religious authority is one plausible source of that norm.

Afrizal et al. (2025) show that *istighfar* functions in Indonesian Muslim discourse both as an emotive interjection and as a religious identity marker, indexing a speaker's moral self-awareness and alignment with Islamic norms. On this reading, *istighfar* is less a reflexive verbal habit than a linguistic act of moral repair, an intentional move to close the gap between the self who transgressed and the moral self that Islamic accountability requires (Afrizal et al., 2025; Basthomi, 2010). This interpretation links the *istighfar* item to the guilt composite only conceptually. A parallel conceptual account comes from Islamic psychology on spiritual jihad, which frames moral struggle as a conflict between higher and lower parts of the self, with moral conduct as its aim (Saritoprak et al., 2020). To sum up, the function of *istighfar* differs across hearer and producer positions, depending on how the speaker interprets the situation and how strongly they feel the need to cleanse the mouth or ear. From the producer's side, *istighfar* may be used to express regret, which is conceptually understood as a way of distancing oneself from the perceived power attached to the taboo context. Such power may be feared not only as visible authority, for instance from other people, but also as an invisible yet experienced force. Within a moral responsibility framework, the speaker who utters *istighfar* after a taboo word may also be attempting to repair the moral discomfort they feel. The present data do not show that *istighfar* is stronger on the producer side than on the hearer side. The producer-side item ($M = 4.10$) was not significantly higher than the hearer-side average ($T = 20$, $p = .15$).

3. Educational Implications for PAI Character Education

This subsection considers what the findings may imply for PAI practice. The data indicate a role-based difference in self-reported guilt, while the difference in *istighfar* between producer and hearer roles was not significant. The data do not show how PAI practice produces these patterns, because no instructional variable was measured. The mechanisms discussed below are therefore hypotheses. They are, however, hypotheses that the wider literature on Islamic character education makes testable. One candidate mechanism, the formative role of *pesantren* education, was examined directly. Students with a *pesantren* background ($n = 8$) reported lower producer-guilt composites than other

students (n = 13; M = 3.58 versus 4.10; Mann–Whitney p = .58). This subgroup is too small to test the explanation, so the mechanism remains untested. The practices below follow from the assumption of speaker responsibility that PAI pedagogy already presupposes (Alfaaza et al., 2025; Syam & Hazairin, 2026).

Indonesian research increasingly treats Islamic character education as a whole-school process rather than a subject. A systematic review of 54 journal articles on character education in madrasah *ibtidaiyah* concluded that a positive school culture is the primary lever for character formation, and that curriculum content alone is insufficient (Arif et al., 2024). Primary-level studies report that routine religious habituation, including daily prayer, Qur'anic recitation, and gratitude practices, is associated with improved moral behaviour (Achadah et al., 2022; Nurizah & Amrullah, 2024), and that habituation is most effective when it is embedded in consistent routines (Purba et al., 2026). Within this framework, the producer-side istighfar item (M = 4.10) can be understood as a possibly internalised habit of repair. Its numerical advantage over the hearer side was not significant, however, so the habit interpretation remains a hypothesis.

Teacher exemplarity is the most consistently reported mechanism in this literature. Tohet & Nuraini (2026) describe teacher modelling and moral habituation as the core processes of moral internalisation in a *madrasah aliyah*, explained through Bandura's social learning theory. Yunita et al. (2025), drawing on *al-Attas*, argue that the root problem of Islamic education is a loss of *adab*, and that teachers must model *adab* both offline and online. This connects to the vignette result most directly. Respondents rated the same taboo expression as more offensive when it came from an *ustadz* (offensiveness M = 4.24) than from a child (M = 3.62), a close friend (M = 2.76), or a stranger (M = 2.90). The scenarios also varied social distance and authority, so this pattern cannot isolate a modelling mechanism. It is consistent, however, with the view that a teacher's conduct carries normative weight. The testable prediction is that students in a teacher-modelling programme should show a larger decline in self-reported taboo use than students in a comparison group.

The research also found that the *ustadz* scenario received the highest offensiveness rating (M = 4.24), compared with 3.62 for the child scenario, 2.90 for the stranger, and 2.76 for the close friend. Hearer guilt, by contrast, was relatively flat across the child, friend, and *ustadz* scenarios (M = 3.67, 2.95, and 3.62). Respondents therefore judged the *ustadz's* utterance most offensive without reporting the greatest personal guilt, and this dissociation between judged offensiveness and personal guilt is the pattern this study contributes. Janschewitz (2008) distinguished personal use from perceived societal reaction and found that taboo words were rated higher in tabooness than in personal offensiveness, which is consistent with the dissociation found here, although Janschewitz did not measure guilt and the scales differ. Sulpizio et al. (2024) showed that taboo words are characterised by low valence and high arousal across 13 languages, while offensiveness varies with community-specific sociocultural knowledge, supporting that offensiveness depends on the community and, in this case, on the speaker's role. T. Jay (2009) argues that institutions including religion sanction taboo words and that child-rearing reinforces these prohibitions, which offers a plausible route for the role effect. Taboo categories are not fixed, however. Wedlock et al. (2025) found that in an Australian sample, -IST language had overtaken sex and religion as the most taboo domain, so the Indonesian pattern should not be assumed to be stable over time. An educational programme on taboo language must therefore specify which expressions and which functions it targets.

PAI teachers report that taboo language production is among the most persistent challenges they address (Alfaaza et al., 2025). The strategies documented, including religious habituation, modelling of *akhlak mulia*, value-based sanctions, and parental engagement, presuppose that the speaker bears primary responsibility. A study on Prophetic Parenting

similarly emphasises moral exemplarity and prophetic communication ethics as central to addressing verbal aggression among adolescents (Fathoni et al., 2024). The present data are consistent with this emphasis on the speaker, but they do not show that speaker-directed practices reduce taboo use, because no intervention or behavioural outcome was measured. The strategies also draw on *hifz al-lisan* discourse and textual evidence on speech responsibility, which frames taboo production as a failure of the speaking self and a matter of direct religious responsibility (Basthomi, 2010; Hamim, 2021). Mukhlis & Cahyadi (2026) propose integrating *adab*, *akhlaq*, and social-media ethics into a digital-based Islamic education curriculum. That proposal concerns a context this study did not measure. Wahid & Hamami (2021) argue that Islamic curriculum development must transmit values as well as knowledge, and must respond to technological and social demands. The implication for PAI is that repair routines and teacher modelling operate in an environment where taboo language is widely visible, and that curricula should address that environment directly.

The ethical challenges of language production have migrated into digital spaces where taboo language is routinely normalised through content creation and peer imitation (Islami et al., 2026; Sari & Gunawan, 2026). Rather than treating hearer and producer responses as interchangeable targets for the same pedagogical intervention, PAI practitioners had better distinguish between them. They can be differentiated into producer-focused moral education (intensive, speaker-accountable, grounded in the theology of *dosa*) and hearer-focused support (contextually sensitive, empathic, attuned to the identity of the speaker and the institutional setting of the encounter) to address different moral mechanisms and require different pedagogical responses.

Three PAI practices follow from the assumption and can be tested. The first is a repair routine. If the *istighfar* impulse is a repair mechanism, classroom practice could make the repair explicit, for instance by having students name the *istighfar* formula and reflect on an accidental slip in a structured journal and then measure whether self-reported slips decline. The second concerns hearers. The child scenario produced the strongest vicarious distress, and the regret item reflects concern about what children learn. Teachers who model a calm, corrective response when a taboo word is spoken in front of younger students may address this concern directly, and this can be evaluated with student self-report and observation. The third is measurement. If PAI practice assumes speaker responsibility, programme evaluation should measure hearer and speaker outcomes separately, so that a programme aimed at speakers can be shown to change speakers rather than only to change how hearers feel.

The vignette responses also show a pattern that bears on the educational setting of this study. Among the four speaker scenarios, the *ustadz* received the highest mean offensiveness rating (M = 4.24), followed by the young child (M = 3.62), the stranger (M = 2.90), and the close friend (M = 2.76). The lexical item was held constant across scenarios. The ordering therefore reflects how respondents evaluated the speaker, not the word. Participants judged the same taboo expression most severely when it came from a religious teacher. This is consistent with what a role-sensitive account of taboo perception would predict, but it is not what a purely referential account would predict (O'Driscoll, 2020).

We read this result as an indication that moral authority, and not only linguistic form, shapes the evaluation of taboo language in this context. A plausible interpretation draws on the expectation that, in Islamic education, the teacher serves as a model whose conduct is itself part of what is taught. *Adab* is transmitted as much through modelling as through instruction (Alfaaza et al., 2025). When a figure whose authority rests on moral example uses a taboo word, the utterance may be perceived as a breach of trust in that figure as well as a breach of language norms. The higher rating for the *ustadz* scenario is compatible with this reading. Respondents were not asked how *adab* was taught to them, and the sample of 21 students from a single study programme cannot establish that *pesantren* or PAI instruction

produced these judgements. Our claim is therefore limited to the observation that role-sensitivity was strongest where moral authority is most explicitly embodied. Any PAI programme that directs its teaching at speakers rests on an assumption about the speaker–hearer distinction. The present data bear on that assumption only as a precondition. The asymmetry was measured under a fixed presentation order, so every mechanism is conditional on a difference that the design cannot fully attribute to role. The four mechanisms are therefore stated as predictions, each with the observation that would count against it.

Four candidate mechanisms can be distinguished, and each has a different evidential status. The first is moral formation through sustained religious habituation. This is a mechanism commonly invoked in accounts of *pesantren* education (Astuti & Winarti, 2026). The present sample on producer-guilt composites were numerically lower in the *pesantren* group (M = 3.58, n = 8) than in the other group (M = 4.10, n = 13; Mann–Whitney p = .58), unfortunately the subgroup is too small to rule out a difference. The second is institutional sanction. T. Jay (2009) observes that taboo words are defined and sanctioned by power institutions. If sanction is operative, producer guilt should vary with the sanctioning authority of the context. The hearer side shows that unacceptability is highest in the *ustadz* scenario (M = 4.52), which is consistent with authority-sensitive evaluation. The producer side was not measured across contexts, so this mechanism is consistent with the data but not tested by them. The third is agency attribution. Mitchell & Haugh (2015) argue that the moral burden of an offence is related to how action is associated with the person who executed it. This account predicts the role asymmetry observed here. It also predicts that the asymmetry should shrink when the speaker's agency is reduced, for instance when a taboo word is quoted or uttered under compulsion. The fourth is vicarious concern for others. In the child scenario, regret (M = 4.33) and moral discomfort (M = 4.33) were among the highest ratings. Hearer guilt in the presence of children therefore appears to be oriented toward the child rather than toward the self.

The curricular implications follow from these mechanisms and should be read as testable predictions. Speaker-directed practice, such as a structured repair routine after an accidental slip, predicts a decline in self-reported slips relative to a comparison group. The producer-side *istighfar* item (M = 4.10) suggests a possible starting point for such a routine, though its difference from the hearer side was not significant. Musthopa et al. (2026) report, from five participants in one vocational school, that institutional religious routines were perceived to reduce psychological distress. Hearer-directed practice, such as teacher modelling of a calm corrective response when younger students hear taboo language, predicts changes in hearer self-report and in observed responses. Both predictions require pre-post designs with comparison groups and behavioural outcomes. Neither can be evaluated with cross-sectional self-report. The study therefore supports a measurement implication more firmly than a curricular one: programmes that aim at speakers should measure speaker outcomes, not only hearer affect, so that a change in how students feel about taboo language is not mistaken for a change in how they speak.

The timing of religious practice may also matter. Balkaya-Ince et al. (2025) report that, among Muslim American adolescents, guilt declined within-person during Ramadan and rose again afterwards. If religious practice modulates guilt over time, the timing of an intervention relative to the religious calendar becomes a design variable. Proposals to extend speaker-focused education to digital settings (Mukhlis & Cahyadi, 2026) concern contexts this study did not measure and should be treated as directions for future research. The contribution of the study to Islamic education is therefore a set of testable predictions that link the theology of speech responsibility to a measurable role distinction, not a demonstrated curricular effect.

D. CONCLUSION

This pilot study set out to test whether Indonesian Muslim students who had been socialised in *adab berbahasa* report higher guilt when they imagine themselves as producers of taboo language than when they imagine themselves as hearers. In a sample of 21 students from the Arabic Language and Literature programme at UIN Sayyid Ali Rahmatullah Tulungagung, producer guilt exceeded hearer guilt. Thirteen participants scored higher on producer guilt, three scored higher on hearer guilt, and five scored equally. The asymmetry therefore points in the direction sin-potential proposition. It is directional support, not confirmation, and the study should be read as a test of whether the distinction can be observed at all in a high-religiosity context.

The findings have limited implications for PAI practice. The study did not measure instruction, classroom practice, or behaviour, and it cannot show how Islamic education produces or fails to produce the pattern observed. What it does provide is a set of testable predictions. Speaker-directed repair routines predict a decline in self-reported slips relative to a comparison group. Teacher modelling of a corrective response predicts changes in how students respond when younger students hear taboo language. Programmes that aim at speakers should measure speaker outcomes directly, not only hearer affect, so that a change in how students feel about taboo language is not taken as a change in how they speak. These predictions connect the theology of speech responsibility to a measurable role distinction, and they are the contribution of this study to the Islamic education literature.

The limitations are substantial and shape how far the findings can be understood. The presentation order was fixed, with hearer scenarios first and producer items last, so the asymmetry may partly reflect carryover. The sample was small, predominantly female, and drawn from one programme. The composites are not fully parallel, because the hearer composite uses the *berdosa* item alone, which translates more closely as “sinful” than as “guilty”, and the only parallel item reached significance only when the *ustadz* scenario was excluded. The measures are self-reported and cross-sectional, and the study measured situational rather than chronic guilt. Each of these limits is a reason to treat the findings as preliminary.

Future research should address these limits directly. A counterbalanced within-participants design would separate role from carryover. A pre-post design with a comparison group would test whether a repair routine or teacher-modelling programme changes both self-report and observed speech. Larger, more varied samples, including students from *madrasah* and secular schools and from different religiosity profiles, would show whether the asymmetry is specific to high-religiosity communities. Replication across the age range, from children to adults, would also test the developmental pattern suggested by the child scenario. Until such designs are completed, the proposition that PAI character education should prioritise speaker responsibility remains a hypothesis. The present study shows that the hypothesis is worth testing and that the distinction it rests on can be measured.

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