

NAVIGATING CROSS-CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS: AMERICAN EFL TEACHERS IN INDONESIAN MADRASAHs

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ABSTRACT

The increasing involvement of foreign English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Indonesian educational institutions has raised questions regarding how they adapt to culturally and religiously distinctive learning environments such as madrasahs. While previous studies have discussed cross-cultural teaching experiences, limited attention has been given to how foreign teachers navigate pedagogical and religious dimensions within Indonesian Islamic schools. Therefore, this study aims to examine the challenges and opportunities experienced by American EFL teachers teaching in Indonesian madrasahs. This research employed a qualitative approach using an exploratory collective case study design. Six American teachers from different madrasahs in Indonesia participated in the study. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews supported by reflective teaching notes and teaching materials and analysed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that participants experienced challenges related to curriculum differences, classroom interaction, communication styles, cultural adaptation, and the integration of religious values into teaching practices. However, these challenges also created opportunities for professional and personal growth through collaboration with local teachers and engagement with the socio-religious environment of madrasahs. The study demonstrates that successful teaching in faith-based educational settings requires not only linguistic competence but also intercultural competence, cultural humility, adaptive pedagogy, and religious literacy. These findings highlight the importance of institutional support, intercultural preparation, and collaborative teaching practices to improve foreign teachers' adaptation and effectiveness in religious educational contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

International cultural exchanges, popularized in this era of rapid globalization, create more opportunities for the role teachers play, including American teachers. With the

increasing demand for cross-cultural understanding and cooperation, American teachers are venturing into diverse educational environments, including Indonesian madrasahs (Mariyono, 2024; Rizapoor & Zafari, 2023). Madrasahs or Islamic schools play a crucial role in shaping the educational landscape of Indonesia, fostering religious and moral development alongside conventional academic learning. American educators' decision to teach in these institutions reflects a growing trend of international collaboration in education. As the worlds of different pedagogical approaches, cultural contexts, and religious foundations intersect, it becomes imperative to understand the challenges and opportunities that these teachers perceive in their roles within Indonesian madrasahs (Romlah et al., 2025). Even though the participation of American teachers in international educational environments might generally be perceived positively, this attitude cannot always be applied blindly. Speaking about English language teaching, the presence of native speakers in the classroom is usually linked to high-quality teaching. Yet this approach has been widely criticized, especially when discussing native-speakerism. This concept focuses on criticism of the idea that native speakers automatically make better teachers than non-native speakers. As a result, it is critical to perceive the role of American teachers in terms not only of their language abilities, but also their adaptability in the particular educational environment.

Although the growing involvement of American educators in foreign settings is usually considered an indicator of beneficial impacts on language acquisition processes, it is necessary to conduct a more rigorous analysis of this assumption. In the sphere of English Language Teaching (ELT), the hegemony of native English-speaking teachers has been under intense scrutiny, especially in the context of the issue of native-speakerism, which critically evaluates the inclination towards favoring native speakers over local educators. From this perspective, the efficiency of American teachers cannot be easily assumed as it depends largely on their capacity to fit into various cultural, institutional, and educational frameworks. Obviously, teachers have some difficulties in the teaching process.

The difficulty level of subjects has begun to increase at this level of education. Therefore, Madrasah students must be given more stimulus in their learning process; the English subject's level of material has also reached intermediate (Rosyadi et al., 2023; Sunengsih & Fahrurrozi, 2015). Students can create projects to enhance their learning, such as writing texts or speaking in English on simple topics. Thus, students can understand the material in English subjects, teachers can provide explanations of the material most efficiently or can use their mother tongue with the target language easily (Hanifa et al., 2024). Additionally, communicative and interactive learning can make students motivated to work on their projects.

The way teachers teach at junior high schools, whether public schools or madrasahs, could be said to be relatively the same. However, there may be slight differences. Because madrasahs are schools based on the Islamic religion, they teach two foreign languages: Arabic and English. Learning foreign languages is not a problem in madrasah schools. However, what is emphasized in madrasahs is how teachers teach, thus students can easily understand the material presented. Teachers' knowledge of classroom management, such as students' motivation and interest, can also maximise the learning process (Abidin & Muhammad, 2024; Neliwati et al., 2025). Relating English in daily life can be a problem in increasing students' motivation in learning English (Liao et al., 2024). One of them is integrative motivation, namely interest in foreign languages, students' desire to communicate with native English speakers, and positive attitudes towards the foreign culture they are studying (Firmansyah et al., 2023).

Integrative motivation encourages integration or collaboration between teachers and native English speakers in Indonesia because of linguistic and cultural differences. However, teacher professionalism remains the priority. Native English speakers (American teachers)

appointed here also adapt to the culture in Indonesia, mainly when they teach in madrasah schools. Apart from that, the professionalism of native American teachers is prioritised when teaching, which includes preparation of material, therefore the students can speak English well based on teaching experience of teaching practice (Wahyuni & Afrianti, 2021; Yang & Forbes, 2025). However, the professionalism of teachers can vary depending on teaching experience and the situation and conditions in which they teach.

Different conditions in schools create challenges for American teachers in Indonesia. Challenges when teaching English include cultural differences, communication methods, the people they interact with, and situations and conditions that differ from their home country (Poedjiastutie et al., 2021). It is well known that most Indonesian people still preserve the cultural traditions of their respective regions, and these traditions are often different from those of the American teachers. Apart from that, American teachers, as native English speakers, also face challenges such as students with different capacities for learning English (Selvi et al., 2024). However, American teachers here are not released alone to teach in class; they are generally still accompanied by their counterpart teacher, who teaches in the same class. Indeed, the experiences of the American educators have to be considered within the framework of their intercultural adaptation, as it is not just a matter of relocation to a different place, but also of getting used to other sets of values, pedagogical traditions, etc. The process in question may be described as non-linear; however, it implies a constant negotiation process between one's professional identity and contextual challenges. As a result, a description of American educators' experiences should be both descriptive and analytical regarding the cultural issues involved.

The socio-cultural differences and challenges American teachers face can be opportunities for them to contribute to introducing knowledge about English language learning (Rachmawati et al., 2022; Wong & Hyde, 2024; Yuan, 2023). With instruction from Americans, students will know directly how the language used by native English speakers is spoken. Apart from that, American teachers can also contribute to their problem-solving when facing challenges.

A native English-speaking American teacher working in a madrasah enhances the English learning experience of students by providing a more dynamic and engaging approach to language acquisition (Nugraha & Sukarno, 2025). This affects students' learning motivation if they learn English directly with native English speakers (Rasyid et al., 2023; Xia et al., 2023). This can support their enthusiasm for learning English and increase their knowledge of socio-cultural differences between Indonesian and American cultures. Knowing the challenges and opportunities of American teachers in Indonesian madrasahs is important for evaluation and knowledge, especially knowing the differences in socio-cultural terms and the conditions in English teaching and learning activities at the junior high school level. Therefore, to discover the challenges and opportunities American teachers face in Indonesian madrasahs, the researcher conducted this research. American educators' decision to teach in these institutions reflects a growing trend of international collaboration in education. As the worlds of different pedagogical approaches, cultural contexts, and religious foundations intersect, it becomes imperative to understand the challenges and opportunities that these teachers perceive in their roles within Indonesian madrasahs.

Various experiences that teachers have while working across cultures have involved difficulties in adjustment, both concerning communication problems and differences in teaching styles. As noted by Poedjiastutie et al. (2021), the differences in cultures and patterns of communication can be listed as one of the primary barriers for foreigners working in such an environment. This situation is similar to that described by the findings of Wu & Gao (2025), where there were discrepancies between teachers' previous experiences and the new environment, which resulted in changes to the teachers' professional attitudes. On the

other hand, Putri (2020) and Cummings (2024) suggest that the institutional context and the type of professional help provided are significant factors influencing teachers' intercultural experiences. The problem is that these experiences have not been thoroughly analyzed yet, and there is a lack of understanding related to religion, which involves interactions between aspects of pedagogy, culture, and religious values, which have not been revealed in much depth. While previous studies have shed light on the experience of teachers working in cross-cultural and international environments, they mostly concentrate on the general aspects of teaching in an educational institution without considering the specifics of religion. Moreover, although many studies highlight the problems that educators encounter and how they overcome them, they have not yet thoroughly analyzed the influence of local religious and cultural values on the process of adaptation and overcoming difficulties. This is why it remains unclear how foreign teachers, especially those coming from America, manage to integrate into the religiously oriented environment.

This research indicates a gap and the need for further research on how American teachers implement their instruction in madrasah contexts, given the challenges and opportunities posed by socio-cultural, educational, and institutional factors. Analyzing these experiences has become crucial not only for assessing global instruction programs but also for enhancing cross-cultural cooperation in English language instruction. The distinctive features of madrasahs, which are religious schools, are inherent in the Indonesian situation since their operations are infused with Islamic morals in the teaching process. In spite of the growing presence of foreign teachers in Indonesia, there is no sufficient research regarding the experience of American teachers at *madrasahs*. This means that there is a need for an investigation into the phenomenon, especially in terms of intercultural adaptation within a religiously oriented educational setting. Thus, the current research is aimed at addressing this void.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the challenges and opportunities faced by American teachers who teach English to Indonesian madrasah students at the junior high school level. The research questions to be answered are: (1) What are the problems faced by American teachers when teaching English in Indonesian madrasahs?, (2) What are the opportunities they see in their professional activities in this context?

By exploring these questions, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how American teachers negotiate pedagogical, cultural, and institutional dynamics within religious-based educational settings. The findings are expected to contribute to discussions on cross-cultural English language teaching, teacher adaptation, and the development of more effective support systems for foreign educators working in faith-based institutions.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

In this research, a qualitative research framework and an exploratory case study research design were utilized to gain a deeper understanding of how American teachers perceive the difficulties and opportunities that they encounter when they teach in the madrasahs of Indonesia. The choice for using the qualitative method was due to its ability to explore the lived experiences of participants, as well as comprehend the meaning of such experiences (Baxter & Jack, 2008). On the other hand, an exploratory case study research design was selected because this study is concerned about a particular issue that has received little attention from previous researchers: the experiences of American teachers working within the context of madrasah schools, which have distinctive social, cultural, and religious elements in Indonesia. In this study, the term “case” refers to a defined system bound by certain parameters, specifically, the professional experiences of American teachers teaching at a junior high school madrasah school in Indonesia. Despite having been drawn from

various madrasah institutions and geographic regions, the subjects are considered collective cases because they have some similar characteristics in terms of their professional status and the religious learning setting. The research employs the strategy of collective case studies, whereby several cases are studied simultaneously to observe patterns and variations of the phenomena being examined.

Individual experience of American teachers serves as the unit of analysis in this research, which will later be interpreted from case to case for a holistic perspective on intercultural adaptation and pedagogical issues encountered by these teachers. In doing so, the researcher will be able to keep depth in individual cases while coming up with a cohesive interpretation of the group of cases as a whole. Furthermore, by adopting this exploratory case study approach, this research focuses not only on describing experiences but also on how social, cultural, and institutional processes shape American teachers' teaching practices and their interactions with students and colleagues in the context of madrasahs in Indonesia (Stake, 1995; Stake, 2005).

Participants

The six participants involved in this study were EFL teachers who teach English as a foreign language in madrasah tsanawiyah. These teachers came from various regions in Indonesia, including Lumajang, Kediri, Ponorogo, Madura, Ciamis, and Bandung. The decision to select participants from diverse locations was made intentionally to capture the experiences resulting from the socio-cultural and institutional variations of madrasah education in Indonesia. On the whole, the participants had professional backgrounds related to English language teaching. They had educational backgrounds in areas related to their profession and teaching experience in EFL environments. Some of them even had teaching experiences abroad, thus adding to their understanding of dealing with cross-cultural issues and educational systems. This data was vital to create a contextual background of the participants' experiences reported in this study.

Purposive sampling was used as the method of selecting participants based on particular criteria. The criteria included: (1) an American teacher who taught English in a madrasah, (2) at least one academic term of experience teaching in a madrasah and thus having knowledge about the culture and society of such places, and (3) being open to discussing their experiences and insights during interviews. Such criteria enabled the selection of participants able to provide relevant information corresponding to the research objectives (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025; Ames et al., 2019). It is important to note that, in this kind of qualitative case study-based research, a sample of six participants was sufficient because the purpose of this research was not about drawing conclusions for broader cases but about getting insight into the phenomena under study in-depth. The differences in the participants' geographic and institutional backgrounds were not considered separate variables, but rather as part of the complexity of the cases studied. This variation, in fact, contributed significantly to understanding how American teachers' experiences can differ and be similar when faced with the diverse context of madrasahs in Indonesia. Furthermore, all participants participated in this study voluntarily and gave their consent to be interviewed through semi-structured interviews. They also consented to audio recording and the anonymous use of their data for analysis. This was done to ensure that the study complied with ethical research principles.

Table 1
Research participants

Participants	Experiences	Residence
P1	2 years	Kediri
P2	2 years	Pamekasan
P3	2 years	Ciamis
P4	1 year	Ponorogo
P5	1 year	Lumajang
P6	6 months	Bandung

Instruments

The main method used to collect information in the research is the semi-structured interview with American teachers who teach in Islamic schools (madrasahs) in Indonesia. The use of the semi-structured interview mode was preferred as it gave room to the interviewees to give an account of their experiences and perceptions regarding the issues raised, and also gave room for discussion on emerging issues. The semi-structured interviews were designed based on the research problem, which was about examining the experiences of the American teachers teaching in madrasahs in relation to the associated problems and prospects. The questions asked during the interviews were crafted in an open format to enable participants to respond accordingly on such issues as culture shock, relations with students and other parties, and coping strategies. The interview questions were validated first internally before use.

The interviews were held via an online medium because the participants resided in different regions of Indonesia. The time taken during the interviews was between 45 and 60 minutes. Consistency was achieved by using the same interview schedule throughout the interviews, although the interviewer asked additional questions depending on the answers given by the participants. All the interviews took place after obtaining consent from the participants. In preparation for the interviews, the participants were provided with the objectives of the study and instructions concerning participation. With their consent, all interviews were recorded and later transcribed into textual form.

In addition, for further substantiation of the data's credibility, this research made use of other data resources such as reflective teaching notes and teaching material used by the participants while teaching. The reflective notes were gathered firsthand from the participants to provide details on their personal experience dealing with the process of teaching and interacting with others interculturally. Meanwhile, the teaching material was gathered from the teaching material used by the participants during their teaching sessions. Both pieces of data acted as forms of triangulation to validate the data gained from the interview. As for reflective notes, these can be used to gain deeper insights into the subjective experience of the participants, while the teaching materials can serve as contextual data to better understand their teaching methods.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. This approach was selected because it provides a systematic yet flexible procedure for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data. The analysis began with data familiarisation, in which the researcher repeatedly read the interview transcripts and supporting documents to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences.

After the familiarisation stage, open coding was conducted to identify significant statements, recurring ideas, and meaningful units related to the challenges and opportunities

experienced by American teachers in Indonesian madrasahs. The generated codes were then grouped into broader categories to identify emerging themes and patterns across the data.

Subsequently, the themes were reviewed, refined, and interpreted to ensure their relevance to the research objectives and research questions. The final stage involved interpreting the meanings embedded within the participants' narratives and examining how the identified themes reflected the pedagogical, cultural, and institutional experiences of American teachers in madrasah contexts. Through this process, thematic analysis enabled the researcher to construct a comprehensive understanding of intercultural adaptation and professional experiences within religious-based educational settings.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

The findings of this research were formulated using multistage thematic coding procedures, which started with identifying significant concepts derived from interviews (open coding) and organizing related themes (axial coding). As a result of such data analysis, it was revealed that the process of adapting to teaching in Indonesian madrasahs for American educators was not a linear activity; rather, it was a continuous struggle caused by pedagogical disorientation. One of the themes that became evident from such research was the conflict between their Western secular education and faith-oriented learning environment. The problems the respondents initially faced were more related to epistemological disagreements regarding time and authority. The following quotation is an example of the conflict that some participants experienced during the research process:

“In the beginning, I felt disoriented because the learning process could not continue without breaking time schedules for praying and other religious activities.” (P5).

Additionally, the finding showed that the resilience mechanisms were established by creating a “third space” collaboration. Instead of applying American standards of teaching, they blended their own teaching techniques with the assistance of the local teachers. The research question about the actual methods of overcoming cultural barriers was thus answered. The perception of the challenge was changed from being viewed negatively (barriers) to positively (opportunities). As an illustration, one of the teachers said:

“In my discussion with the teachers at the madrasah, I realized that the concept of flexibility or ‘elastic time’ is actually a form of tolerance to the extremely dynamic community here.” (P3).

Systematically, these findings also highlight a significant transformation in professional identity. Adapting to a curriculum that integrates religious values forced teachers to redefine their roles, not just as language instructors, but as practitioners of culturally responsive pedagogy. This experience went beyond acquiring technical teaching skills; it broadened their perspective on education as community-based work. The conclusions of this data analysis confirm that open-mindedness and patience are not simply personality traits but professional prerequisites that enable foreign teachers to navigate the madrasah educational landscape effectively. The relationships among these themes, encompassing both structural challenges and opportunities for professional growth, are systematically summarized and categorized in Table 2 to provide clearer conceptual distinctions and avoid thematic overlap.

Table 2
Summaries of the findings

Analytical Categories	Sub-Categories
Challenges	Differences in curriculum Teaching methods Learning culture
Opportunities	Applying interactive teaching methods Managing diversity Training session
Experiences contribution	Enrich authentic materials Open mindedness Professional Confidence Learning Motivation

The findings reveal that American teachers encountered various challenges during their initial adaptation to the Indonesian educational system and the socio-cultural environment of madrasahs. Most participants experienced confusion regarding differences in curriculum structure, teaching methods, classroom interaction, and learning culture. Compared to their previous teaching experiences in the United States, the educational environment in madrasahs placed a stronger emphasis on respect for teachers, character education, and religious values. Consequently, participants needed to adjust their teaching approaches and classroom management strategies to align with local expectations and student behaviour. In addition, differences in time management and discipline, commonly referred to as “rubber time,” emerged as one of the early challenges faced by participants.

Several participants described how their initial assumptions about students’ classroom behaviour changed after interacting with local teachers. One participant stated:

“In the first weeks, I thought my students were uninterested because they were very quiet. It wasn't until I discussed it with a local teacher that I understood that it was a form of respect, not passivity.” (P2)

Similarly, other participants emphasised the distinct educational orientation of madrasahs, particularly the integration of moral and religious values into classroom practices:

“Teaching in a madrasah made me rethink the concept of education. Here, moral and religious lessons are emphasised. That's something I rarely see in the schools where I used to teach in America.” (P1)

The findings suggest that cross-cultural teaching experiences in Indonesian madrasahs involve more than technical or instructional adaptation. Participants experienced broader personal and professional transformation as they encountered educational values and teaching practices that differed significantly from those in their home country. This finding supports Merryfield's (2000) argument that global pedagogy and intercultural understanding are essential competencies in cross-cultural education.

Most participants also reported difficulties in adapting to the dual curriculum system that combines general academic subjects with religious instruction. This structure required teachers to manage limited instructional time and adapt their lesson planning accordingly. Nevertheless, participants appreciated the openness of madrasahs toward innovative teaching approaches, including interactive discussions and the use of digital learning media. One participant explained:

“I am very impressed that the madrasah is open to experimenting with teaching methods as long as it does not conflict with their basic values.” (P6)

Another important finding concerns the dynamics of teacher–student relationships. Participants observed that students tended to demonstrate high levels of politeness and respect toward teachers, although they were often less verbally expressive during classroom

interactions. Initially, several teachers interpreted this behaviour as a lack of engagement; however, over time, they understood it as part of local cultural etiquette, consistent with the findings of Widyawati and Sukadari (2023).

Cultural and religious adaptation also emerged as a significant challenge. Participants reported difficulties in understanding religious routines such as congregational prayers, mosque activities, and school schedules, influenced by Islamic practices. Despite these challenges, most participants acknowledged the important role of local colleagues in helping them understand the cultural and institutional context of madrasahs. Through this process, participants developed greater cultural humility, openness, and sensitivity toward different value systems. Teachers who positioned themselves as learners within the cultural environment were able to build stronger relationships with students and colleagues, supporting previous findings by Gunasekara et al. (2022) and Uygur (2022).

In addition to the challenges they faced, participants identified several opportunities that contributed to their professional development. They gained valuable experience in implementing interactive teaching methods, managing culturally diverse classrooms, and engaging with broader educational communities. Collaboration with local teachers and participation in professional activities also expanded their intercultural competence and professional networks.

Furthermore, participants emphasized that understanding local cultural and religious norms played a significant role in the success of the teaching and learning process. They learned to adapt instructional materials, classroom activities, and communication styles to make them more culturally appropriate and effective within the madrasah context. Respect for local traditions and religious practices, including prayer schedules and mosque-related activities, became an essential aspect of their professional adaptation.

Participants also reported that teaching in Indonesian madrasahs enhanced their tolerance, cultural awareness, and understanding of diversity. The experience encouraged them to become more flexible, open-minded, and adaptive in their teaching practices. Moreover, many participants expressed that the experience increased their confidence and preparedness to work in international educational environments. They viewed their experiences in Indonesia as opportunities for both professional growth and personal transformation, enabling them to develop broader global perspectives on education and intercultural engagement.

The findings indicate that American teachers' experiences in Indonesian madrasahs are characterized by both significant challenges and meaningful opportunities for development. Through continuous adaptation and intercultural interaction, participants developed greater pedagogical flexibility, cultural sensitivity, and professional competence within faith-based educational settings.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that education in Indonesian madrasahs is not merely a process of knowledge transmission, but rather a socio-cultural ecosystem that requires educators to engage deeply with local cultural norms and religious values. This finding reinforces the study's initial assumption that the experiences of American teachers are shaped not only by pedagogical expectations but also by continuous interaction with the socio-religious environment of faith-based educational institutions. In addressing the first research question concerning the challenges faced by American educators in Indonesian madrasahs, the findings demonstrate that these challenges extend beyond technical or instructional issues. Participants encountered difficulties related to communication styles, curriculum structures, classroom interaction, and cultural expectations, particularly during their initial period of adaptation in Indonesia.

The findings further indicate that the challenges experienced by participants cannot simply be understood as functional barriers. Rather, they reflect broader differences in educational philosophies and cultural meaning systems. Consistent with Geertz's (1973) concept of culture as a system of meaning, madrasahs function as educational spaces where teachers must reinterpret their professional roles within strong moral and religious frameworks. Consequently, issues such as “rubber time,” indirect communication patterns, and the integration of religious practices into school routines should not be viewed merely as organizational challenges, but as manifestations of differing value systems between Western secular educational traditions and Indonesian Islamic educational culture.

In relation to previous literature, the results of this study extend the findings of Poedjiastutie et al. (2021), who identified cultural differences as a major barrier for foreign workers. However, this research offers a more complex perspective than Putri's (2020) study. While Indonesian English teachers in Thailand found the adaptation process relatively easy, American educators in madrasahs faced an additional layer of complexity, where religious values became a determining factor in classroom management and social interactions. This provides a critical contribution to the debate on Native English Speaking Teachers (NESTs); native speaker status is apparently inadequate without in-depth cultural and religious literacy. This experience demonstrates that the success of cross-cultural teaching in madrasah settings depends on teachers' ability to navigate the “third space” where Western instructional practices meet local wisdom.

In relation to previous studies, the findings support and extend the work of Poedjiastutie et al. (2021), who identified cultural differences as major barriers for foreign educators working in Indonesia. However, this study offers a more nuanced perspective by highlighting the central role of religious values in shaping classroom management, institutional culture, and social interaction within madrasahs. Unlike the findings reported by Putri (2020), where Indonesian teachers in Thailand experienced relatively smooth adaptation processes, the American teachers in this study faced additional complexities associated with navigating faith-based educational environments. These findings contribute to ongoing discussions regarding Native English-Speaking Teachers (NESTs) by demonstrating that native-speaker status alone is insufficient for successful teaching in cross-cultural contexts. Instead, effective teaching in madrasahs requires intercultural competence, cultural humility, and sensitivity toward religious and local educational values.

Furthermore, the challenges these educators faced were not merely obstacles but also catalysts for professional growth and identity transformation, in line with the arguments of Wu and Gao (2025). A significant difference in this study was the strong moral and spiritual component; Participants not only adapted their teaching methods but also underwent a process of self-reflection on the values and responsibilities of educators. This supports Cummings' (2024) findings on the influence of institutional structures on teachers' lives, but emphasizes that in religious institutions, the transformation is more existential. Intellectual humility becomes a key ingredient of success in such an instance since it is necessary that teachers accept becoming “learners” in a different setting in order to develop empathy and meaning with the students. Despite these factors, the research results remain relevant in answering the second research question, as the findings indicate that the participants viewed their experiences not only as inhibiting factors, but also as facilitating factors for their growth.

Another important finding concerns the participants' professional transformation throughout the adaptation process. The challenges they encountered functioned not only as obstacles but also as opportunities for personal and professional growth. In line with the findings of Wu and Gao (2025), the participants gradually developed new perspectives regarding teaching, intercultural interaction, and professional identity. Nevertheless, this

study reveals a stronger moral and spiritual dimension within the adaptation process. The participants were not only required to modify their teaching practices but also encouraged to reflect critically on the ethical responsibilities of educators working within religious educational settings. This finding supports the argument of Cummings (2024) regarding the influence of institutional structures on educators' professional experiences, while also emphasizing that adaptation within religious institutions may involve deeper existential and value-based reflection.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that intellectual humility and openness play crucial roles in successful intercultural adaptation. Participants who positioned themselves as learners within the local cultural environment were more capable of building meaningful relationships with students and colleagues. Through collaboration with local teachers and engagement with the broader madrasah community, participants developed greater empathy, flexibility, and intercultural awareness. This process enabled them to reinterpret unfamiliar educational practices not as deficiencies, but as culturally meaningful forms of interaction and learning.

In answering the second research question, the study demonstrates that participants perceived their experiences not only as sources of difficulty but also as valuable opportunities for development. Teaching in Indonesian madrasahs enhanced participants' intercultural competence, broadened their understanding of global education, and encouraged the development of culturally responsive teaching strategies. The participants became more adaptable in managing classrooms, designing instructional materials, and communicating with students from different cultural and religious backgrounds. These experiences ultimately contributed to their professional confidence and preparedness for future international educational contexts.

The findings also carry important practical implications for international teacher exchange programs and educational institutions employing foreign educators. Pre-departure preparation programs should extend beyond pedagogical and linguistic training by incorporating intercultural orientation, religious literacy, and socio-cultural adaptation strategies. Additionally, madrasahs and educational institutions should establish formal support systems, such as mentoring programs and collaborative teaching arrangements involving local teachers, to facilitate the adaptation process for foreign educators. Such support mechanisms are essential for fostering sustainable intercultural collaboration and improving the effectiveness of cross-cultural teaching within faith-based educational environments.

This study demonstrates that cross-cultural teaching in Indonesian madrasahs cannot be reduced to the transfer of teaching techniques across national boundaries. Rather, it represents a dynamic process of negotiation between global pedagogical practices and local cultural-religious values. The experiences of American teachers in this study illustrate the importance of intercultural sensitivity, cultural humility, and collaborative learning in creating meaningful and effective educational engagement within religious-based institutions.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that teaching in Indonesian madrasahs requires more than linguistic competence, as foreign teachers must also adapt to local cultural norms, religious values, and faith-based educational practices. The findings show that American teachers experienced challenges related to communication, curriculum, and cultural adaptation, while also gaining opportunities for professional and personal growth through intercultural interaction and collaborative teaching.

The study contributes to discussions on cross-cultural English language teaching by emphasizing that successful teaching in madrasahs depends not only on native-speaker status

but also on intercultural competence, cultural humility, and religious literacy. Practically, the findings suggest the importance of intercultural preparation programs, mentoring systems, and collaboration between foreign and local teachers to support effective adaptation in religious educational settings.

Despite its contributions, this study is limited by its small sample size and focus on American teachers only. Future research is recommended to involve participants from broader cultural backgrounds and explore perspectives from local teachers and students to provide a more comprehensive understanding of intercultural teaching in madrasahs.

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INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

Participation in this study was voluntary. Prior to participation, all participants were provided with clear information regarding the study's objectives, procedures, potential risks, and anticipated benefits. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their personal information and informed that all data collected would be used solely for research purposes. They were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data generated and analyzed in this study are not publicly available because they contain information that could compromise participant privacy and confidentiality. Restricting public access ensures compliance with ethical research principles and applicable data protection regulations. Nevertheless, the dataset may be made available to qualified researchers upon reasonable request for verification or further analysis. Any such request will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis and will require prior approval from the appropriate institutional ethics authority.

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