



Emotions and Emotion Regulation in Indonesian Islamic Schools: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study of EFL Students' Lived Experiences across Intercultural Contexts

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Abstract

Emotions matter in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning because they shape how students participate, persist, and respond to classroom demands. Although emotion regulation has received growing attention in language education, little is known about how students in Indonesian Islamic schools describe and manage their emotions in everyday English lessons. This gap is important. When models developed mainly in Western psychological traditions are applied without cultural reading, students' silence, hesitation, or restraint can easily be mistaken for low motivation or weak ability. In an Islamic-Indonesian school context, the same responses may also be connected with patience, modesty, face-saving, respect for others, or the wish to keep classroom harmony. Using a qualitative phenomenological design, this study explored the emotional experiences and emotion regulation strategies of 67 students from two Islamic high schools in East Kalimantan, Indonesia. Data were gathered through open-ended questionnaires and two focus group discussions involving 20 selected students, and were analysed thematically. The findings show three intertwined emotional patterns: enjoyment, confidence, and motivation; anxiety, confusion, boredom, and fear of making mistakes; and fluctuating or neutral emotional states. Students most often used cognitive reappraisal ($n = 25$) and expressive suppression ($n = 13$), but they also reported more practical strategies, including deep breathing, peer talk, goal reminders, resting, drawing, asking questions, and silent

self-composure. These findings suggest that emotion regulation in Islamic EFL classrooms is not only an individual cognitive process. It is also embodied, social, and shaped by local cultural expectations. The study therefore calls for EFL classrooms where teachers read students' silence and hesitation carefully, reduce the social risk of error, and support emotional well-being through culturally responsive pedagogy.

Keywords: EFL classroom, emotion regulation, intercultural communication, Islamic school

1. Introduction

Emotion is part of the ordinary work of learning a foreign language. In English classes, students do not only process vocabulary, grammar, or pronunciation; they also deal with confidence, anxiety, embarrassment, enjoyment, and the pressure of being heard by others (Wierzbicka, 1999). Positive emotions may encourage students to try, ask questions, and stay engaged, whereas anxiety, boredom, or fear of mistakes may keep them silent even when they understand the lesson (Boudreau et al., 2018; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; D'Mello & Graesser, 2012). For this reason, EFL learning needs to be examined not only as a cognitive activity, but also as an emotional and social experience.

A growing body of EFL research has examined emotion regulation in relation to writing, motivation, engagement, higher-order thinking, social media-supported learning, and AI-assisted learning (Guo et al., 2025; Heydarnejad, 2025; Rezai et al., 2024; Yanping et al., 2025; Zheng et al., 2023). Other studies have highlighted co-regulation and socially shared regulation in collaborative English learning (Zhang et al., 2021, 2022, 2024). These studies have advanced the field, but many of them remain measurement-oriented. They tend to identify how often students use particular strategies, while saying less about how students themselves explain their feelings, what classroom moments trigger those feelings, and how social, cultural, and religious expectations shape their responses.

This issue of emotion becomes more visible in Islamic school contexts. Gross's (2001, 2002) distinction between cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression offers a useful starting point for understanding how people manage emotions. Yet, when the model is used too quickly in Indonesian Islamic classrooms, some meanings may be missed. A student who keeps quiet after feeling confused, for example, may be judged as passive or unprepared. The same silence, however, may also be an attempt to remain patient, avoid disturbing friends, protect face, or show respect for the teacher. Likewise, reluctance to speak English in public may involve not only limited linguistic confidence but also the social discomfort of being wrong in front of others (Derakhshan & Fathi, 2024)). The problem, therefore, is not simply that Indonesian Islamic schools are underrepresented. More importantly, students' emotional practices may be misread when cultural and religious meanings are treated as irrelevant.

Indonesian Islamic schools offer a layered intercultural setting. Students learn English while living within local expectations of humility, togetherness, restraint, and respect; within Islamic ethical orientations that value patience, gratitude, sincerity, and self-control; and within global English norms that often reward self-expression, directness, and public performance. Fauzan &

Nadia (2024) show that English classrooms in Indonesian Islamic universities are shaped by discourse, institutional ideology, and religious educational values, not by language skills alone. Fauzan & Nadia (2025) further demonstrate that Islamic EFL classrooms can carry values of religious moderation, tolerance, and cultural flexibility. These works support the view that English learning in Islamic educational institutions should be read as a linguistic, cultural, and ethical encounter.

Against this background, the present study asks two questions: (1) What emotional experiences do EFL students report in Indonesian Islamic high school classrooms? and (2) What emotion regulation strategies do they use in this intercultural learning environment? The study aims to offer a context-sensitive account of EFL emotion regulation and to help teachers respond to students' anxiety, silence, boredom, and hesitation without reducing these responses to lack of competence or motivation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Emotion and Emotion Regulation

Emotion can be understood as a changing psychological state that involves appraisal, bodily response, social context, and expression (Gross, 2002; Gross & John, 2003; McRae & Gross, 2020; Derakhshan & Yin, 2024). In second and foreign language learning, emotion is not an additional issue placed outside the lesson. It is part of the lesson itself. Enjoyment can support persistence and classroom participation, while anxiety can limit speaking, lower willingness to communicate, and make students more afraid of errors (Bensalem, 2021; Boudreau et al., 2018; Fathi & Derakhshan, 2019; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). Positive psychology also reminds us that students' well-being is connected with engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (Seligman, 2018, 2021). From this perspective, EFL learning is both an affective and a relational process.

Emotion regulation refers to the ways individuals influence which emotions they experience, when these emotions occur, and how they are expressed (Gross, 2001, 2002; McRae & Gross, 2020; Greenier et al., 2021). Gross's process model is especially useful because it separates two common strategies. Cognitive reappraisal happens when a person changes the meaning of a situation before the emotional response becomes too strong. Expressive suppression happens when a person holds back the outward expression of an emotion that has already appeared. In an English classroom, a student who treats a difficult speaking task as practice for improvement is using reappraisal. A student who feels nervous but hides it during a presentation is using suppression.

Still, this model cannot explain everything that happens in a classroom. Students may regulate emotions through friends, classroom routines, bodily calming, religious meanings, or culturally accepted silence. Because language learning often happens through interaction, peer support and socially shared regulation are also central to EFL learning (Zhang et al., 2021, 2022, 2024). For this reason, the present study uses Gross's model as a point of departure, while allowing other strategies to emerge from students' own accounts.

2.2 Intercultural Dimensions of Emotion Regulation in Islamic EFL Learning

Culture influences what people feel comfortable showing, hiding, or naming. Emotional display rules differ across societies, and collectivist communities often give high value to restraint,

respect, and social harmony (Hofstede, 2001; Risager, 2007; Matsumoto et al., 2008). In Indonesian Islamic schools, students' ways of managing emotion may be connected with *sabar* (patience), *ikhlas* (sincerity or acceptance), *malu* (shame or modest restraint), *syukur* (gratitude), and *tawakkal* (trust in God). These values should not be used as automatic labels for every student response. Rather, they provide a cultural background for interpreting why silence, self-control, and peer-oriented support may feel appropriate in moments of classroom difficulty.

One useful tension is the relation between *malu* and *bangga*. In many communicative language teaching traditions, mistakes are treated as a normal and even necessary part of learning. In many collectivist classrooms, however, public mistakes may carry social consequences because they can threaten face or make a learner appear less competent before peers. Students may therefore avoid speaking, hide confusion, or wait until they are sure of the answer. At the same time, English can also produce *bangga*, or pride, when students successfully understand a lesson, imagine speaking with foreigners, or see English as useful for travel and work. English learning therefore contains both vulnerability and aspiration.

Studies of English teaching in Indonesian Islamic institutions help situate this tension. Fauzan & Nadia (2024) argue that English classrooms in Indonesian Islamic universities are shaped by discourse practices and institutional ideologies. Additionally, Fauzan & Nadia (2024) show how religious moderation values may appear through teachers' discourse, while Fauzan & Nadia (2025) discuss tolerance, cultural flexibility, and religiously informed values in EFL classrooms in Islamic universities. These studies matter for the present article because they show that Islamic EFL classrooms are not neutral spaces. Global English norms meet local religious and cultural meanings there. Emotion regulation, therefore, needs to be read as an intercultural practice, not only as individual self-management.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This article is framed as a qualitative study using thematic analysis. This framing is more accurate than the earlier phenomenological claim because the main data came from open-ended questionnaires supported by focus group discussions, not from prolonged phenomenological interviews (Leavy, 2017). A qualitative design fits the purpose of the study: to stay close to students' accounts while describing the emotions they reported and the strategies they used in EFL classrooms. The study still attends to students' lived classroom experiences, but it does not claim to establish a universal essence of the phenomenon in the strict Husserlian sense.

3.2 Participants and Research Context

The participants were 67 students from four learning groups in an Advanced English Learning course at two Islamic high schools in East Kalimantan, Indonesia. This number is larger than a typical phenomenological sample because the study was not designed as pure phenomenology. The larger group allowed the researchers to see variation across classes and schools. The questionnaire responses provided breadth, while the focus group discussions provided clarification and richer explanation. Twenty students joined two FGD sessions, with ten students in each session. They were selected to represent different emotional patterns in the questionnaire data, including positive, negative, mixed, and neutral responses.

3.3 Instruments and Data Collection

Data collection took place in two stages. First, students completed an open-ended questionnaire through Google Form during class. The main question asked: 'Please describe your emotional experiences while learning in your foreign-language classroom. What emotions do you commonly feel during lessons or activities? How do you manage or regulate these emotions, for example, strategies you use to stay calm, motivated, confident, or engaged?' The researcher explained the question in Indonesian so that students understood what was being asked. Students were also allowed to answer in Indonesian, which helped them express feelings without the extra burden of writing in English. Second, two focus group discussions were held to check and deepen the questionnaire findings. The FGD prompts included questions such as: 'Can you describe a moment when you felt nervous in English class?', 'What do you usually do when the material is difficult?', 'Why do some students choose to stay silent?', 'How do friends help you feel calmer or more confident?', and 'Are there school, cultural, or religious values that influence how you manage emotions?' The prompts were used flexibly so that students could explain their experiences in their own terms.

3.4 Data Analysis

The data were analysed following Braun & Clarke's thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Braun et al., 2016). The researchers first read all questionnaire and FGD responses several times to become familiar with the data. They then coded meaningful units related to emotion labels, classroom triggers, regulation strategies, and possible cultural meanings. Initial codes were grouped into candidate themes, including enjoyment, anxiety, confusion, emotional fluctuation, positive reframing, silence, peer support, breathing, rest, and classroom engagement. The themes were then checked against the original responses so that they remained grounded in what students had actually said. Finally, the themes were named and organised into two larger categories: emotional experiences and emotion regulation strategies. Two researchers independently reviewed a sample of the data and compared their coding decisions. Any differences were discussed until a shared interpretation was reached. The FGDs also served as participant validation because students were invited to confirm, clarify, or complicate the preliminary interpretation.

3.5 Researcher Reflexivity and Trustworthiness

Because the researchers are Indonesian educators who are familiar with Islamic school contexts, reflexivity was important. The researchers were aware that terms such as *sabar*, *ikhlas*, and *tawakkal* could easily be overused if they were imposed on the data. During analysis, these terms were used only when they were directly supported by students' words or when the interpretation was cautiously linked to responses about staying calm, accepting a situation, avoiding conflict, or not disturbing others. Where the data did not explicitly mention religious terms, the writing uses careful expressions such as 'may reflect', 'can be interpreted as', or 'is consistent with'. Trustworthiness was supported through anonymised student codes (S1-S67), peer discussion among researchers, FGD-based participant validation, and direct quotations from students.

4. Results

The analysis produced two main categories: students' emotional experiences and their emotion regulation strategies. The findings are reported through condensed themes and selected

quotations rather than long lists of excerpts. Cultural and Islamic interpretations are used cautiously; they are offered only where they are supported by the students' responses or by the wider classroom context.

4.1 Emotional Experiences of EFL Students in Indonesian Islamic High School Classrooms

The first pattern was positive emotional experience. Many students described English learning as fun or enjoyable, especially when they could understand the lesson, join lively activities, or connect English with future goals. Some simply said that they felt happy in class. Others linked English with travel, future careers, or communication with foreigners. These accounts suggest that English can become a source of aspiration. In this sense, *bangga* is not only personal pride; it is also a feeling that English may open a wider social world beyond the local classroom.

The second pattern was negative emotional experience. Anxiety appeared most often in speaking-related situations, especially when students had to speak in front of classmates or answer questions directly. Students also mentioned confusion, tiredness, laziness, and lack of confidence when the material was difficult or when they received many assignments. These emotions should not be read only as academic weakness. In the Islamic school context, fear of making mistakes may be strengthened by social evaluation and *malu*, because an incorrect answer in front of peers can feel embarrassing. Thus, reluctance to speak may show an intercultural tension between communicative English pedagogy, which encourages public expression, and local norms that value modesty and careful self-presentation.

The third pattern was emotional fluctuation. Several students moved between enjoyment and stress, optimism and pessimism, calmness and anger, depending on mood, task difficulty, and classroom interaction. Others described themselves as neutral or unsure about what they felt. This pattern makes the findings more human than a simple division between positive and negative emotion. Students may like English and still be afraid to speak. They may know that English is useful and still feel bored or tired. They may stay silent not because they are indifferent, but because silence helps them manage discomfort.

Table 1. Condensed Themes of Students' Emotional Experiences

Theme	Sub-theme	Representative evidence	Analytic reading
Positive emotional experiences	Enjoyment and happiness	"I'm so happy" (S5); "Fun and exciting" (S8, S30); "Happy and enjoy" (S28).	Enjoyment was usually linked to understandable lessons and lively classroom activity.
Positive emotional experiences	Confidence and motivation	"I always feel positive ... motivated and confident" (S46); "I feel confident because by learning English, I become more confident when dealing with foreigners" (S55).	Confidence grew when students imagined English as useful beyond school.
Positive emotional experiences	Realization of English's importance	"I realized that I need English since I have a hobby of traveling" (S18); "English is ... an international language" (S40).	English was valued as a route to travel, career, and wider communication.

Theme	Sub-theme	Representative evidence	Analytic reading
Negative emotional experiences	Anxiety and fear of mistakes	"Anxious when speaking publicly" (S13); "I feel so nervous" (S48); "afraid of being wrong" (S67).	Speaking anxiety was tied to public performance and fear of error.
Negative emotional experiences	Confusion and task pressure	"Confused, little bit stressed" (S29); "many assignments ... quickly confused and tired" (S57).	Confusion increased when tasks were difficult or too many at once.
Mixed or fluctuating emotions	Emotional variability	"Sometimes I feel optimistic, sometimes I don't" (S1); "I feel mixed feelings" (S54).	These responses suggest both academic pressure and emotional fatigue.
Neutral emotional state	Affective detachment	"I feel just normal" (S35); "I don't really know what emotions I had" (S21).	Students' feelings shifted with mood, task difficulty, and classroom situation.

4.2 Emotion Regulation Strategies EFL Students Use in Intercultural Learning Environment

Students used both cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression. Reappraisal appeared when students tried to think positively, remembered their learning goals, or treated difficulty as something that could be managed. Suppression appeared when students hid negative feelings, stayed silent, or tried to maintain composure. However, suppression needs careful interpretation in this setting. In many psychological discussions, suppression is treated as less adaptive because it hides emotion rather than resolving it. In this study, silence and composure may also function as polite and culturally acceptable ways of avoiding disruption and keeping classroom harmony. This does not mean that suppression is always helpful, but it does mean that teachers should not automatically read silence as disengagement.

Students also reported strategies that sit outside Gross's two major categories. They took deep breaths, ate, rested, slept, talked with friends, set goals, asked questions, focused on tasks, and drew pictures. These responses show that emotion regulation was practical, bodily, social, and sometimes creative. The data do not provide strong evidence to claim that students explicitly used religious rituals such as dhikr as classroom strategies. A more careful conclusion is that students' ways of calming themselves may be consistent with Islamic-Indonesian values of patience, self-control, and communal support because they emphasise calmness, silence, and connection with peers.

Table 2. Condensed Themes of Students' Emotion Regulation Strategies

Regulation category	Strategies	Representative evidence	Analytic reading
Cognitive reappraisal	Positive thinking, mental reframing, goal reminder	"I try to think positively" (S24); "set small daily goals to stay motivated" (S13).	This fits Gross's reappraisal, but students often described it in simple classroom language.

Regulation category	Strategies	Representative evidence	Analytic reading
Expressive suppression	Hiding stress, staying silent, maintaining composure	"When I'm stressed out, I'll stay silent and keep it to myself" (S3); "I don't show my negativity" (S16).	Suppression may signal both emotional hiding and culturally valued composure.
Embodied regulation	Deep breathing, rest, eating, sleeping	"I take deep breaths before participating" (S13); students also reported resting or eating to improve mood.	Students often managed emotion through the body, not only through thoughts.
Social regulation	Talking with friends, hanging out, snacking together	"Chatting with friends or snacking" (S56); "talk to others so I feel calm and happy" (S49, S54).	Friends acted as a practical source of calm and confidence.
Learning-oriented regulation	Asking questions, participating, practicing, focusing	"I try to engage by asking questions and joining group activities" (S13).	Some students handled emotion by returning attention to learning tasks.
Creative distraction	Drawing and preferred activities	Students reported drawing (S2, S49), listening to music, or watching movies.	Drawing worked as a short-term distraction when stress was hard to solve immediately.

5. Discussion

The findings show that English learning in Indonesian Islamic high schools is emotionally mixed. Students felt happy, confident, and motivated when they understood the lesson or imagined English as useful for travel, work, or wider communication. This supports previous studies that identify enjoyment and motivation as important resources in language learning (Boudreau et al., 2018; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Guo et al., 2025). The present study adds a local nuance: enjoyment was not only a pleasant classroom feeling. For some students, English carried the promise of mobility and contact with the wider world. Their positive emotion was therefore tied to aspiration.

Anxiety, confusion, boredom, and fear of mistakes were also clearly present. This finding is consistent with studies showing that EFL learners often feel anxious when they must perform publicly in another language (Bensalem, 2021; D'Mello & Graesser, 2012). The contribution of the present study is to show how this anxiety is shaped by the social meaning of error. In a communicative English class, making mistakes is usually framed as part of learning. In the students' context, however, a mistake may also threaten face, invite embarrassment, or lower confidence in front of classmates. This helps explain why some students preferred to remain quiet or composed even when they were struggling.

The findings also show both the usefulness and the limits of Gross's (2001, 2002) framework. Cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression helped organise many of the students' responses. Students reframed difficulty by thinking positively or remembering goals, and they suppressed

emotion by hiding stress or keeping silent. Yet the data also show that classroom regulation is broader than this two-part model. Students managed emotion through breathing, rest, peer talk, task focus, asking questions, and drawing. In other words, emotion regulation was not located only inside the individual mind. It also moved through the body, peer relations, classroom expectations, and local moral values.

This interpretation is in line with Fauzan & Nadia's (2024) view that English classrooms in Indonesian Islamic universities are shaped by discourse and institutional ideology. It also connects with Fauzan & Nadia's (2024, 2025) work on religious moderation, tolerance, and cultural flexibility in Islamic EFL classrooms. Although the present study focuses on students rather than teachers, it reaches a similar point: English learning in Islamic educational settings is never culturally empty. Students regulate emotions at the meeting point between global English norms and Islamic-Indonesian values. Silence, restraint, and reliance on friends should therefore be understood within the classroom ecology, not treated only as individual psychological symptoms.

Social support was one of the most important findings. Previous research on collaborative learning has shown that peer and group regulation can support language learning (Zhang et al., 2021, 2022, 2024). The present data confirm this pattern while adding a local cultural reading. Talking with friends, eating together, and seeking peer comfort may work as forms of communal regulation that fit with *gotong royong* and collective care. This does not mean that every peer interaction is consciously religious or cultural. It simply shows that students often calm themselves through relationships rather than through private self-control alone.

For teachers, the implication is practical. EFL classrooms need to be safe enough for students to make mistakes, but the encouragement to 'speak more' should be handled carefully. Teachers can reduce the social risk of error through pair work, small-group rehearsal, anonymous response tools, supportive feedback, and gradual speaking tasks. Silence should also be read diagnostically rather than punitively. A quiet student may be confused, anxious, preserving face, or trying to stay composed. When teachers recognise these possibilities, they can offer help without making the student feel exposed.

The study therefore extends EFL emotion research by placing emotion regulation within an intercultural classroom ecology. Regulation involves individual appraisal and expressive control, but it also includes bodily calming, peer-supported coping, and culturally valued self-composure. Gross's framework remains useful, but it needs to be situated in the cultural and educational setting where students actually learn. Such contextualisation is necessary if emotion regulation theory is to travel responsibly across languages, cultures, and school systems.

6. Conclusion

This study explored the emotional experiences and emotion regulation strategies of 67 EFL students in two Indonesian Islamic high schools. Students reported positive, negative, fluctuating, and neutral emotions. They used cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression, but they also relied on deep breathing, peer talk, goal-setting, classroom engagement, rest, and drawing. These findings suggest that emotion regulation in Islamic EFL classrooms cannot be fully explained by individual psychological models alone. It is also shaped by local values, Islamic educational norms, peer relations, and the global demands of English learning.

Several limitations should be noted. The study used open-ended questionnaires and FGDs, so it provides a descriptive account rather than prolonged observation of emotion regulation as it unfolds in real time. In addition, some cultural and Islamic interpretations were inferred cautiously from students' responses and classroom context; students did not always name values such as sabar, ikhlas, or tawakkal directly. Future studies should therefore collect more explicit data on religious and cultural meaning through in-depth interviews, classroom observation, and student emotion diaries. Diary studies would be particularly useful for tracing how students' emotions change across specific tasks, such as oral presentations, vocabulary tests, or English essay writing. Comparative work across Islamic schools, public schools, and pesantren-based institutions could also help identify which strategies are broadly Indonesian and which are more specific to Islamic educational settings.

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