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Language Matters: Strengthening Teachers' Capacity to Support Linguistically Diverse Learners in a 3T Madrasah Ibtidaiyah

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A B S T R A C T

Teachers in linguistically diverse classrooms often switch to students' home language because it seems easier or because students are assumed not to understand, rather than as a planned pedagogical choice. This community engagement program aimed to strengthen Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (MI) teachers' capacity to support linguistically diverse learners through Linguistically Responsive Teaching (LRT), articulating the switch in language as a part of lesson plan. The program was conducted at MI Zainul Huda, Kangean Island, Sumenep, East Java, using a participatory community-engagement approach that included a needs assessment, an LRT workshop, technical guidance on contextual learning media, and a classroom engagement session. Eleven teachers participated in the program. Program evaluation involved a teacher questionnaire, post-workshop evaluation, and descriptive classroom observation. The questionnaire was administered before and after the program as part of the evaluation process; however, the two administrations involved different respondents and were therefore not used to measure individual changes. Teachers actively participated throughout the workshop and expressed interest in further professional development related to teaching in the 3T context. Post-program evaluation indicated positive perceptions of the workshop, particularly regarding understanding LRT, its classroom application, and perceived confidence. Classroom engagement with Grade 5 and 6 students further illustrated that simple language, repetition, gestures, body language, and contextual examples could facilitate student participation when students initially experienced difficulty understanding the instructional language. The program demonstrates the feasibility of contextual, low-cost, and practice-oriented LRT capacity building in a linguistically diverse 3T Islamic primary school.

Keywords : Linguistically Responsive Teaching, Multilingual Learners, Teacher Capacity Building, Madrasah Ibtidaiyah, Community Engagement, 3T Areas

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INTRODUCTION

Many children in Indonesia begin school learning through a language they do not use at home, and their teachers often receive little preparation for teaching across this gap. At MI Zainul Huda, a Madrasah Ibtidaiyah on Kangean Island, Sumenep, East Java, wch is a part of Indonesian remote areas, students speak Kangean at home but are expected to learn academic content through Indonesian, while also studying Madurese, Arabic, and English. Teachers bridge the gap in the way that seems most practical, by shifting into Kangean when students appear not to understand. This language switch is not a problem. However, unplanned decision about the switch might be problematic. The situation described above could reflect a wider challenge. Indonesia is characterized by extensive linguistic diversity, with hundreds of local and minority languages spoken across geographically dispersed communities. In education, this diversity becomes particularly important when the languages children use at home differ from the language of formal instruction. UNESCO (2025) emphasizes that multilingual education should recognize learners' linguistic resources and provide appropriate teacher preparation and learning materials. Language is also closely connected to access to academic content, particularly as students encounter increasingly specialized vocabulary, discourse, and reasoning in school (Snow, 2010). Recent evidence shows that multilingual pedagogies can support both curricular access and cognitive and socio-affective outcomes among primary-school learners (Veerman et al., 2026).

These challenges can be more complex in Indonesia's remote, outermost, and disadvantaged areas, commonly referred to as 3T (*terdepan, terluar, tertinggal*). Linguistic diversity in these settings may intersect with geographical isolation, limited educational resources, and restricted opportunities for teacher professional development. Indonesian studies have documented the use of bilingual instruction and translanguaging in linguistically diverse primary classrooms, demonstrating that teachers' strategic use of multiple languages can support classroom interaction and learning (Sama et al., 2023). However, these practices do not necessarily address how teachers can be systematically supported to develop practical capacities for responding to linguistic diversity in remote school contexts. Linguistically Responsive Teaching (LRT) provides a relevant framework for addressing this challenge. Lucas and Villegas (2013) describe LRT as involving both teachers' orientations toward linguistic diversity and the pedagogical knowledge and skills needed to support linguistically diverse learners. It encourages teachers to recognize students' linguistic backgrounds as resources while providing instructional support for language development and access to academic content. Research has shown the importance of visual and multimodal scaffolding and continued professional learning in developing linguistically responsive practices (Heikkola et al., 2022) Broader research on multilingual pedagogies likewise highlights scaffolding, affirming approaches, translanguaging, and cross-linguistic strategies as ways of supporting learners' participation and access to content (Veerman et al., 2026).

Teacher capacity is therefore central to translating these principles into classroom practice. Studies indicate that teacher beliefs, professional experiences, and professional development are associated with teachers' approaches to multilingual learners (Pohlmann-rother et al., 2021). Professional development can also support teachers'

cognition, teaching practices, and self-efficacy in working with multilingual learners (Krulatz et al., 2022). Nevertheless, there remains a practical gap between this growing body of research and teacher capacity-building initiatives in geographically isolated Indonesian Islamic primary schools. In particular, limited attention has been given to short, contextual, and low-cost professional development that can be implemented in 3T settings where access to technology and other educational resources may be constrained. This community engagement program addresses this gap by adapting LRT principles into a practical teacher capacity-building program at MI Zainul Huda, Duko Laok, Kangean Island, Sumenep, East Java. The program positioned teachers as the primary beneficiaries and agents of institutional strengthening through four integrated activities: needs assessment, an LRT-oriented workshop, hands-on guidance on contextual and low-cost learning media, and classroom engagement with students. The program emphasized strategies that could be implemented without dependence on sophisticated technology or stable internet connectivity.

The central problem addressed was how teachers in a 3T Madrasah Ibtidaiyah can be supported in developing practical responses to students' linguistic diversity. Accordingly, this article aims to describe the implementation of the LRT-based community engagement program, examine participating teachers' responses to the training, and document classroom observations following the use of language-responsive strategies at MI Zainul Huda

MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

Program Designs

This community engagement program employed a descriptive community-engagement approach with participatory principles. The approach was selected because the program focused on implementing and documenting a teacher capacity-building activity rather than testing causal effects. Teachers were actively involved in discussing their classroom experiences, practicing language-responsive strategies, developing contextual learning materials, and reflecting on their possible classroom application (Wood, 2013).

Partner Profile and Participants

MI Zainul Huda is a Madrasah Ibtidaiyah in Duko Laok, Kangean Island, Sumenep, East Java, in a 3T area. It serves nearly 146 students in Grades 1 to 6. Almost all students speak Kangean at home and in the community, whereas Indonesian is the language of academic instruction. The curriculum also includes Madurese as a local-content subject as well as Arabic and English. Overall, students therefore engage with four languages at school in addition to their mother tongue. Eleven teachers participated as the primary beneficiaries, including English, Arabic, science, and Islamic religious education teachers as well as classroom teachers. Grade 5 and 6 students took part only in the classroom demonstration and were not treated as research respondents. The school gave permission for the activities to be documented and for photographs to be published.

Program Materials and Procedure

The program consisted of four interconnected activities: (1) needs assessment, (2) LRT workshop, (3) technical guidance, and (4) classroom engagement. The needs assessment used a 20-item five-point Likert questionnaire covering four dimensions: awareness and understanding, knowledge and strategies, confidence and self-efficacy, and teaching practice and readiness. The questionnaire was administered before and after the program as part of the evaluation process. The pre-program questionnaire was completed by six teachers and the post-program questionnaire by nine teachers. Because the respondents were not fully matched, the two administrations were not treated as paired measurements and were not used to determine individual change. The LRT workshop introduced linguistic diversity, asset-based perspectives, and practical language-responsive strategies based primarily on Lucas and Villegas (2013). The strategies included simplified language, repetition and rephrasing, visual and multimodal support, contextual examples, vocabulary support, gestures, body language, and the strategic use of students' existing linguistic resources. The technical guidance focused on developing simple, contextual, and low-cost learning materials, such as picture-based materials, vocabulary cards, visual prompts, and contextual illustrations, without requiring sophisticated technology or stable internet access. The final activity involved classroom engagement with Grade 5 and 6 students during English learning. Facilitators demonstrated the use of simplified language, repetition, gestures, body language, visual cues, and contextual examples to support students who initially experienced difficulty understanding the instructional language.

Data Collection and Evaluation

Program evaluation used three sources: teacher questionnaires, post-workshop evaluation, and descriptive classroom observation. The post-workshop evaluation consisted of five five-point Likert items addressing participants' perceptions of the materials, relevance of the strategies, classroom application, confidence, and intention to apply the strategies. Classroom observation focused on students' observable participation and responsiveness when language-responsive strategies were used, particularly during explanation, interaction, and learning activities. The observation served as descriptive evidence of classroom engagement rather than as a measure of student achievement or language proficiency.

Data Analysis

Questionnaire responses were analyzed descriptively using mean scores and percentages. The percentage score was calculated using:

$$P = (X / Xmax) \times 100\%$$

where P represents the percentage score, X the observed score, and Xmax the maximum possible score. Post-workshop evaluation results were summarized using item-level means and percentages. The pre- and post-program questionnaire data were not subjected to paired or inferential statistical analysis because the respondents were not fully matched. Classroom observations were analyzed descriptively and interpreted alongside the teacher evaluation findings. The interpretation was limited to the participating teachers and observed classroom context and was not intended to establish causal or generalizable effects.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Teachers' Language Practices Before the Program

In the pre-worskhop discussion, teachers reported that Indonesian is the intended language of instruction but that they frequently shift to Kangean because students understand it more easily. They acknowledged that this departs from the expected language of instruction. Practices varied across subjects and teachers. In English and Arabic lessons, questions and tasks were generally given in Indonesian, while oral explanations could mix Indonesian and Kangean, with Kangean often dominant. The discussion also showed that language choices were almost unplanned. Teachers admitted that they are not aware of the language uses could be designed as part of a lesson, such as they did not identify in advance the new vocabulary to be introduced in the class. One of the teachers admitted that he never thought to list some specific scientific words students in science class need to know in the lesson plan. A lesson on flora and fauna, for example, introduces terms that students are unlikely to encounter in Kangean at home, yet teachers did not list or plan such terms in their lesson plans. While in foreign language courses like Arabic and English, teachers have limited usage of the target language in their instructing and instead use Bahasa Indonesia without realising the intentions.

These findings indicate that there is limited awareness on employing diverse languages as instruction and learning strategies. Shifts into Kangean were prompted by the assumption that students would not understand, or by convenience, rather than by a planned purpose. The literature distinguishes spontaneous translanguaging, which occurs naturally whenever multilingual speakers communicate, from pedagogical translanguaging, which teachers plan for a specific purpose (Prilutskaya, 2021). The teachers' use of Kangean was of the first kind. Its benefits, however, depend on intentionality; without support, translanguaging tends to stay superficial and selectively applied (Camilleri et al., 2026). The absence of planned vocabulary is equally significant, because specialized academic vocabulary is a major barrier to learning content through the school language (Snow, 2010). Liu et al. (2017) likewise found that language remained the biggest barrier for multilingual learners, and they describe teachers using bilingual materials to help students understand technical terms.

Implementation of the Teacher Capacity-Building Program

The program was implemented through four interconnected activities: needs assessment, LRT workshop, technical guidance, and classroom engagement. A total of 11 teachers participated in the community engagement activities. Rather than relying exclusively on lecture-based training, the program provided teachers with opportunities to discuss classroom experiences, identify language-related challenges, explore LRT principles, practice relevant strategies, and observe classroom implementation. Teachers demonstrated active participation during discussions and practical activities. They also expressed interest in receiving additional professional development related to educational challenges in 3T contexts. The implementation demonstrates the feasibility of introducing LRT principles through a practical community engagement format in a remote Islamic primary school. This finding is consistent with literature emphasizing professional learning as an important component of multilingual education. Howell et al. (2024), through a systematic review, highlighted the importance of professional

development for teachers working with multilingual learners. Heikkola et al. (2022) likewise identified continuing professional learning needs among primary teachers working with linguistically diverse students.

Teachers' Responses to the LRT Workshop

The post-workshop evaluation indicated positive teacher perceptions. The five evaluation items received mean scores between 4.33 and 4.44 out of 5, equivalent to 86.7%–88.9% of the maximum score. Furthermore, the positive responses indicate that the LRT workshop created opportunities for teachers to reflect on their existing instructional practices, particularly in responding to students who come from different linguistic backgrounds. In linguistically diverse classrooms, teachers are expected to recognize that students may have different levels of proficiency in the language of instruction, different vocabulary repertoires, and varying abilities to express their understanding. Therefore, teachers need appropriate pedagogical strategies to ensure that language differences do not become obstacles to meaningful participation. The workshop introduced an important perspective by positioning students' linguistic backgrounds as potential learning resources that can support comprehension, interaction, and knowledge construction. This perspective is particularly relevant to Madrasah Ibtidaiyah institutions in disadvantaged, frontier, and outermost (3T) areas, where students may use local languages as their primary means of communication in everyday life.The evaluation findings also suggest that teachers recognized the practical significance of integrating language-responsive approaches into their instructional activities. Such approaches may include using familiar vocabulary to introduce unfamiliar concepts, providing contextual examples, encouraging students to communicate their ideas through different linguistic resources, and gradually developing their competence in the language of instruction.

Table 1. Teachers' Perceptions of the LRT Workshop

Evaluation Aspects	Mean	Percentage
Materials helped teachers understand LRT	4.44	88.9%
Strategies were relevant to the madrasah context	4.33	86.7%
Activities helped teachers understand classroom application	4.44	88.9%
Teachers felt more confident after the workshop	4.44	88.9%
Teachers planned to apply the strategies	4.33	86.7%

Source: Post-workshop evaluation data, 2026

The highest mean scores were found for understanding LRT, understanding classroom application, and perceived confidence following the workshop. These results indicate that teachers perceived the workshop as understandable and relevant to their immediate teaching context. However, these findings represent self-reported immediate perceptions and should not be interpreted as direct evidence of increased teacher competence Further, we found that the self-assessment questionnaire showed a different pattern. Scores were high before the workshop and lower after it across all four dimensions (Table 2).

Table 2. Teachers' Self-Assessment Before and After the Workshop: Mean Scores (Percentages), Unmatched Respondents

Dimension	Before (n = 6)	After (n = 9)
Awareness and understanding (items 1–5)	4.10 (82.0%)	3.87 (77.3%)
Knowledge and strategies (items 6–9)	4.50 (90.0%)	4.08 (81.7%)
Confidence and self-efficacy (items 10–14)	4.33 (86.7%)	4.11 (82.2%)
Teaching practice and readiness (items 15–20)	4.36 (87.2%)	4.26 (85.2%)
Overall (items 1–20)	4.32 (86.3%)	4.09 (81.8%)

Source: Pre- and post-workshop questionnaire data, 2026

The lower post-workshop scores should be interpreted cautiously. The two groups were not matched, and three additional teachers completed the post-workshop questionnaire, so the difference may partly reflect who responded. The largest differences were on item 9, knowing how to use a language familiar to students as a bridge to learning (4.50 before; 3.78 after), and item 15, considering students' language backgrounds when planning lessons (4.50 before; 3.89 after). These are the two items most closely related to intentional language use. Before the workshop, teachers rated themselves highly on these items, even though in discussion they reported never having planned their language use. One plausible explanation is response-shift bias: once teachers understood what planned language use involves, they may have judged their own practice more critically (Howard, 1980). This might indicate that the lower scores reflect a more realistic self-assessment rather than a loss of capacity. The positive workshop evaluation is consistent with Mahalingappa (2023), who linked linguistically responsive preparation to teachers' self-efficacy with multilingual learners, and with research connecting teacher training and professional experience to supportive beliefs about multilingualism (Pohlmann-rother et al., 2021). The present results add a caution: self-efficacy ratings collected before teachers are introduced to a concept may overstate their readiness.

Teachers' expressed interest in further training was another important observation from the program. This response indicates that a single workshop may function as an entry point rather than a complete professional development cycle. Sustained professional learning requires opportunities for teachers to reflect on implementation, receive feedback, and adapt strategies to their classrooms. Krulatz et al. (2022) emphasized the relevance of professional development to teacher cognition and multilingual teaching practices, while Gallagher (2024) identified the importance of teacher beliefs, professional experiences, and contextual factors in multilingual education. For remote 3T schools, continued university–school partnerships may therefore be particularly valuable because geographical isolation can restrict teachers' access to professional learning opportunities.

Classroom Demonstration: Language Use in Practice

We, the facilitators, used English from the greeting through their self-introduction. Several students responded by asking, “Pakai bahasa Indonesia saja, please” (“Just use Indonesian, please”). We interpreted this as a sign that some students were struggling to follow the lesson. However, rather than switching to another language, we decided to continue using English as the medium of instruction while adapting our approach to help

students understand the material. We spoke more slowly, used shorter and simpler expressions, and supported meaning with pictures and body language. English remained the language of facilitator–student interaction throughout the lesson, but the students themselves used all the languages they knew to help them understand and participate in the lesson. When working in groups, the students discussed tasks among themselves in Kangean. When asking the facilitators questions, they used gestures, pictures, or Indonesian, while some students persisted in English despite hesitation and shyness. In small-group interaction, facilitators occasionally used a single Indonesian word to check understanding of a target word that was difficult to convey through pictures or gestures, and then returned to English.



Figure 1. LRT Workshop for Teachers at MI Zainul Huda

Note. The facilitators conducted a workshop on Linguistically Responsive Teaching (LRT) with teachers at MI Zainul Huda, Kangean Island, East Java.



Figure 2. Classroom demonstration with Grade 5 and 6 students

Note. One of the team members is demonstrating the LRT approach to the classroom teacher during the practical learning session at MI Zainul Huda

The teaching demo sessions illustrate the difference between switching languages by default and using languages by design. The students' request for Indonesian echoed the assumption teachers had described: that students need a familiar language in order to understand. We, as the facilitators, responded to it by modeling an alternative. Comprehension was first supported by changing the linguistic and multimodal conditions of instruction, in line with the visual and semiotic scaffolding identified by Heikkola et al. (2022). Our teaching also emphasize on modelling and contextualization in quality content teaching for multilingual students as described by Viesca et al. (2022). Where another language was used, it had a specific purpose, clarifying one difficult target word, and a limited scope, after which the lesson returned to English. Students' use of Kangean in peer groups, meanwhile, shows that the home language remained a resource for collaborative meaning-making even when it was not the medium of instruction.

Two limitations apply. The demonstration was taught by facilitators rather than the participating teachers, so it illustrates the strategies but does not show teachers' capacity to use them. This has been addressed by the principals who requested for an extended workshop in the next time. In addition, English is a foreign language for these students, so the demonstration does not directly represent Indonesian-medium content lessons (though it could be a great example for English, Arabic, and Maduranese courses). The same principles (a planned purpose, a limited scope, and a return to the target language) however could apply to decisions about Kangean and Indonesian in subjects such as science.

Contextual and Low-Cost Strategies for a 3T Madrasah

An important characteristic of the program was its emphasis on strategies that could be implemented without sophisticated technological infrastructure. The strategies included visual materials, vocabulary cards, gestures, repetition, contextual examples, and locally relevant resources. This approach is important because professional development needs to consider the actual material conditions in which teachers work. Strategies requiring stable internet connectivity or specialized software may be difficult to sustain in remote schools. Veerman et al. (2026) identified scaffolding as one major category of multilingual pedagogy in primary education, while Heikkola et al. (2022) highlighted visual and multimodal scaffolding. Wakat et al. (2023) likewise documented inclusive strategies in linguistically diverse classrooms, including visual resources, teacher-created materials, multilingual labels, and realia. The present program therefore illustrates that LRT does not necessarily require sophisticated resources. Teachers can begin by modifying how they communicate, explain, demonstrate, and contextualize learning.

From Linguistic Diversity as a Challenge to Linguistic Diversity as a Resource

A central principle introduced through the program was the shift from viewing linguistic diversity as a deficit toward recognizing students' linguistic backgrounds as potential resources. This orientation is central to LRT. Lucas and Villegas (2013) emphasize that linguistically responsive teachers need to understand students' linguistic backgrounds and develop pedagogical practices that respond to linguistic diversity. Veerman et al. (2026) similarly identified affirming, translanguaging-based, scaffolding, and cross-linguistic pedagogies as approaches for supporting multilingual learners. For

MI Zainul Huda, this perspective is particularly relevant because students' linguistic experiences are embedded within family and community life. Teachers can use these existing experiences as starting points for classroom communication rather than treating students' home languages solely as obstacles. This does not require teachers to abandon Bahasa Indonesia or another target instructional language. Instead, students' existing linguistic resources can be used strategically to facilitate comprehension and participation while maintaining intended learning objectives.

Implications for Strengthening Islamic Educational Institutions in 3T Areas

The program suggests three implications for strengthening teacher capacity in 3T madrasah. First, linguistically responsive teaching does not depend on sophisticated resources. The strategies introduced, including simplified language, repetition, gestures, pictures, contextual examples, and planned vocabulary, can be used without stable internet access or specialized software. Veerman et al. (2026) identify scaffolding as a major category of multilingual pedagogy in primary education, and Wakat et al. (2023) document similar low-resource strategies in linguistically diverse classrooms. Second, the aim is not to stop teachers using students' home language, nor to replace Indonesian as the language of academic learning. Kangean is a resource that students bring to school, and the school's success in Madurese speech competitions shows that it already values regional languages. The task is to use students' languages with a clear purpose. Asset-based orientations toward linguistic diversity are central to LRT, but they need to be translated into concrete planning decisions. Third, the step from workshop to practice remains incomplete. Teachers practised drafting LRT-based lesson plans during the technical guidance, but the program did not follow them into their subsequent planning and teaching. Without that step, teachers' language choices are likely to remain spontaneous. Because teachers remain in the school after the facilitators leave, sustained university–school partnership focused on lesson planning offers the most direct route to lasting change, particularly where geographical isolation limits access to professional learning.

CONCLUSION

The community engagement program at MI Zainul Huda, Kangean Island, demonstrated the feasibility of implementing a practical Linguistically Responsive Teaching-based teacher capacity-building program in a 3T Madrasah Ibtidaiyah. The program responded with an LRT workshop that explicitly addressed intentional language use, module-based technical guidance in which 9 out of 11 teachers practised drafting LRT-based lesson plans, and a classroom demonstration with Grade 5 and 6 students. Teachers evaluated the workshop positively and expressed interest in further professional development. Lower self-assessment scores after the workshop, particularly on items related to familiar-language use and language-aware planning, may indicate that teachers became more aware of what intentional language use requires. The classroom demonstration illustrated how simplified language, pictures, gestures, and a limited, purposeful use of another language can support comprehension while maintaining the target language. Because the questionnaire respondents were not matched and the program did not follow teachers into their subsequent lesson planning,

it does not provide evidence of individual improvement or changed practice. Future programs should prioritize mentoring teachers to write intentional language use and target vocabulary into their actual lesson plans, followed by classroom observation of how these plans are enacted and matched evaluation procedures.

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