:: J-LANGUA ::
(Journal of Language Instruction and Applied Linguistics)
Volume 02 Number 02 2026
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ISSN : 2721-3811 (ONLINE)

The Role of Language Learning Strategies in Enhancing English Proficiency Among Islamic Boarding School Students

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First Received: 22 August 2026 Final Proof Received: 23 September 2026

ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify language learning strategies that can enhance the English-speaking proficiency of senior high school students in an Islamic boarding school. Utilizing a descriptive qualitative approach, data were gathered through dormitory observations, in-depth interviews, and documentation analysis. The findings reveal that students' speaking performance is influenced by both linguistic and non-linguistic factors. The primary linguistic challenges include limited academic vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties, and weak grammatical structure. Meanwhile, the non-linguistic barriers consist of low self-confidence, excessive anxiety during presentations, and a lack of topic familiarity. The study also highlights that high school-aged students frequently rely on literal translation from Indonesian to English, which further hinders their speaking fluency. To overcome these challenges, students employ various adaptive autonomous strategies, such as repetitive reading, utilizing digital dictionaries, watching educational YouTube videos, and actively seeking guidance from more knowledgeable peers or mentors.

Keyword: *learning strategies, English proficiency, English speaking, high school students.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Language is a fundamental means of communication and plays an important role in human life. Since human beings are social creatures and language is a social phenomenon, every member of a community needs it to express their necessities. Nowadays, the English language holds a prestigious status as one of the most widely spoken languages in the world. Consequently, the importance and popularity of learning English are increasing dramatically worldwide, including in Indonesia (Nurseha and Huseynova 2025). For this reason, English has been given a significant value at various institutions, schools, and higher educational organizations. Among the four language skills that second or foreign language learners must master, speaking skill is paramount. Tarigan argues that someone who masters a language is intuitively able to speak in that language. Therefore, speaking in any language is one of the most significant competences to be improved as a primary means of communication.

However, speaking skill is also considered one of the most difficult and challenging parts of language learning. Learners who study English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or

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English as a Second Language (ESL) often find it very difficult to express their thoughts, ideas, information, and hopes successfully. Even in educational settings where English is heavily emphasized, students mostly evaluate their progress and success based on how well they have improved in their spoken language skill (Nurseha 2021). Concentration on speaking in a second or foreign language is naturally difficult, and this challenge becomes even more complex when learners are immersed in unique educational environments like Islamic boarding schools. While Islamic boarding school environments provide a rich communal structure, senior high school students frequently experience distinct challenges due to their intense daily routines and divided linguistic focus between Arabic and English (Yenuri and Nurseha 2025).

The struggle to master English speaking within this boarding school context stems from a combination of linguistic and non-linguistic factors. Linguistically, senior high school students often struggle with limited academic vocabulary, poor pronunciation, and weak grammatical structures. These issues are frequently compounded by a strong reliance on their native language, Indonesian. Instead of thinking directly in English, students tend to employ literal translation, which disrupts their speech fluency and causes errors in sentence construction (Nurseha 2025a). On the other hand, non-linguistic or psychological barriers play an equally disruptive role. Many students experience excessive anxiety and a lack of self-confidence, particularly when mandated to deliver public speeches or classroom presentations. This anxiety is often worsened by poor topic familiarity, causing students to freeze or avoid speaking tasks altogether.

To bridge these gaps, students cannot rely solely on formal classroom instruction; they must develop and deploy autonomous Language Learning Strategies (LLS). Previous research has widely acknowledged that successful language learners are those who take active control of their learning process through various cognitive and metacognitive strategies. In a boarding school setup, where formal teacher interaction is limited outside class hours, students' independent efforts become paramount. While extensive research has investigated English speaking anxiety and learning strategies in public schools, fewer studies have deeply explored how senior high school students in an Islamic boarding school environment organically utilize modern tools and peer networks to overcome their anxieties. This study

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fills that gap by providing a contextualized analysis of how these students navigate their linguistic and psychological barriers (Nurseha 2025). Specifically, this research focuses on the autonomous and collaborative strategies they employ outside the classroom such as repetitive reading, utilizing digital dictionaries, leveraging educational YouTube content, and engaging in peer mentoring within their dormitories.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. The Nature of Speaking Skill

Speaking is one of the four core language skills that plays a paramount role in communication. It is an active and productive oral skill that involves complex cognitive processes to express ideas, feelings, and thoughts in real-time. According to Tarigan (2015), speaking is the ability to pronounce articulation sounds or words to express, state, and convey thoughts, ideas, and feelings. Tarigan further argues that a person who truly masters a language is intuitively able to speak that language fluently. In this view, speaking capability serves as the ultimate parameter of language proficiency; a learner may understand grammatical rules and possess a broad vocabulary, but their linguistic competence remains abstract until it is successfully materialized through spoken communication.

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), mastering speaking skills is widely acknowledged as one of the most challenging aspects of language acquisition. Unlike reading or writing, which allow learners time to review and edit their output, speaking requires spontaneous and simultaneous processing of vocabulary selection, pronunciation accuracy, and grammatical structures. Consequently, EFL learners frequently face significant hurdles in achieving oral fluency, making speaking a highly demanding competency to capture within formal and informal educational settings.

2. Language Learning Strategies (LLS)

To navigate the inherent difficulties of foreign language acquisition, learners do not merely act as passive recipients of input; instead, they employ various cognitive and behavioural tools known as Language Learning Strategies (LLS). Language learning strategies are specific actions, behaviours, steps, or techniques that students use to improve their progress in developing error-free second or foreign language skills. These

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strategies are crucial because they transform learners from passive students into active, autonomous participants who can direct their own learning process outside the formal classroom environment.

One of the most comprehensive and widely accepted frameworks for classifying these strategies is proposed by Rebecca Oxford (1990). Oxford categorizes LLS into two major classes: direct and indirect strategies, which are further divided into six subcategories:

Direct Strategies

Direct strategies directly involve the target language and require mental processing of the language itself.

- Memory Strategies: Techniques used to store and retrieve new linguistic information, such as grouping words or using imagery.
- Cognitive Strategies: Direct manipulation of the language through practicing, analyzing, note-taking, or repetitive reading to deeply internalize text structures.
- Compensation Strategies: Mechanisms that enable learners to use the target language despite large gaps in knowledge, such as guessing intelligently or utilizing digital dictionaries to find missing words quickly.

Indirect Strategies

Indirect strategies support and manage language learning without directly engaging the linguistic elements.

- Metacognitive Strategies: Functions that allow learners to control their own cognition by planning, organizing, and evaluating their learning process, such as intentionally watching educational YouTube content to model native pronunciation.
- Affective Strategies: Methods used to regulate emotions, motivation, and attitudes, which are essential for minimizing speaking anxiety and boosting self-confidence.
- Social Strategies: Actions involving learning with or from others, such as engaging in peer mentoring or seeking guidance from more knowledgeable peers within the dormitory.

In an Islamic boarding school environment, the application of both direct and indirect strategies becomes highly critical. Since senior high school students spend the majority of their time in dormitories with limited access to teachers outside class hours, their

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reliance on autonomous and social learning strategies—such as leveraging digital tools and peer networks serves as the primary catalyst for enhancing their English speaking proficiency.

III. METHOD

1. Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design. A qualitative approach is suitable for this investigation as it aims to understand, interpret, and describe social phenomena within their natural setting without manipulating the environment. In this context, the design allowed the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the language learning strategies used by senior high school students to enhance their English speaking proficiency, as well as the linguistic and non-linguistic challenges they experience in their daily boarding school life.

2. Research Setting and Participants

The research was conducted at an Islamic Boarding School. This location was chosen purposively because the institution implements a distinct linguistic environment where students are required to balance their religious studies with language acquisition. The participants of this study were senior high school students (grades 10 to 12). This specific age group was selected because high school students are expected to possess a higher level of cognitive autonomy and analytical awareness regarding their own learning strategies compared to younger students.

3. Data Collection Techniques

To ensure data triangulation and maintain validity, data were gathered through three primary qualitative instruments: observations, in-depth interviews, and documentation analysis.

Dormitory and Classroom Observations

The researcher conducted non-participant observations within both the formal classroom setting and the informal dormitory environment. The observation focused on:

- How students interacted in English during daily routines.
- Student behaviours during public speaking activities or classroom presentations.

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- Signs of speaking anxiety (e.g., freezing, hesitation, or shifting back to the native language).
- Spontaneous peer interaction and autonomous study habits outside class hours.

In-Depth Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were held with selected senior high school students to capture their personal experiences, perceptions, and attitudes. The interview guide was structured to elicit detailed responses regarding:

- The specific linguistic difficulties they face (vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar).
- Psychological barriers affecting their speech (anxiety, lack of self-confidence).
- The direct and indirect learning strategies they implement, such as how they use digital dictionaries, watch YouTube videos for language modelling, or leverage peer networks.

Documentation Analysis

To supplement the observational and interview data, the researcher analyzed relevant institutional documents. These included the boarding school's language regulations, schedules for language programs (such as weekly public speaking or vocabulary drills), and students' presentation materials or self-study logs.

4. Data Analysis Procedure

The collected qualitative data were analysed using the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which consists of three concurrent flows of activity:

- Data **Condensation:** Selecting, focusing, simplifying, and transforming raw notes from observations and transcripts from interviews into organized summaries.
- Data **Display:** Presenting the condensed data systematically using narrative text, matrices, or charts to facilitate drawing conclusions.
- **Conclusion Drawing/Verification:** Identifying patterns, configurations, and regularities to formulate valid conclusions about the students' language learning strategies and speaking challenges.

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IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Results

Based on the data collected through observations, in-depth interviews, and documentation analysis, the findings are categorized into two major themes: the challenges faced by senior high school students in English speaking and the autonomous language learning strategies they employ to overcome these hurdles.

Challenges in English Speaking Performance

The findings reveal that the senior high school students face interconnected barriers that hinder their oral fluency. These challenges are divided into linguistic and non-linguistic factors:

- **Linguistic Barriers:** Students struggle significantly with a limited mastery of academic vocabulary and correct English pronunciation. Grammatical errors also frequently occur during spontaneous speech. A major finding is the students' heavy reliance on their native language, Indonesian. Due to a lack of immediate vocabulary recall, students perform literal (word-for-word) translation from Indonesian to English in their minds before speaking, which severely disrupts their speaking tempo and causes structural errors.
- **Non-Linguistic Barriers:** Psychological hurdles play a disruptive role in the students' oral production. Many *santris* experience high levels of performance anxiety and low self-confidence, particularly when mandated to deliver public speeches or classroom presentations. This anxiety is frequently triggered by a lack of topic mastery; when students do not fully comprehend the subject of their presentation, they tend to freeze, hesitate excessively, or avoid speaking altogether.

Language Learning Strategies Employed by Students

To mitigate these challenges outside the formal classroom, senior high school students utilize several self-directed and adaptive learning strategies within their dormitory environment:

- **Repetitive Reading:** Students actively read English texts or presentation notes multiple times to familiarize themselves with sentence patterns.

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- **Utilizing Digital Dictionaries:** Smartphone-based dictionaries are frequently used to look up unfamiliar words and check correct phonetic transcriptions instantly.
- **Watching Educational YouTube Videos:** Students independently leverage multimedia platforms like YouTube to watch English tutorials, vlogs, or speeches to model authentic native pronunciation and expression.
- **Peer Mentoring:** Students actively form informal study circles in the dormitory, seeking guidance and feedback from more advanced peers or language mentors.

2. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that mastering English speaking skill within an Islamic boarding school framework requires students to continuously balance linguistic competence and psychological resilience. Tarigan emphasizes that language mastery is inherently tied to the intuitive ability to speak fluently. However, for EFL learners in an Islamic boarding school, this intuition is often blocked by the interference of their native language. The tendency of students to use literal translation indicates that they are still operating within the conceptual framework of Indonesian while trying to produce English output. This cognitive friction delays oral delivery, confirming that speaking is indeed one of the most demanding and complex skills to capture spontaneously.

Furthermore, the non-linguistic barriers found in this study—such as low self-confidence and presentation anxiety strongly align with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis. When students feel intimidated by the public speaking format or suffer from a lack of topic familiarity, their affective filter goes up. This psychological barrier prevents them from successfully deploying the vocabulary and grammar they might actually know in a written format. To overcome these multifaceted constraints, the senior high school students manifest high levels of learner autonomy by deploying various Language Learning Strategies (LLS) that map perfectly onto Oxford's taxonomy.

- **Cognitive Strategies through Repetitive Reading:** By reading texts repeatedly, students try to transition from conscious grammatical planning to more automated speech production, which helps reduce the habit of literal translation.

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- **Compensation Strategies through Digital Dictionaries:** When faced with immediate vocabulary gaps during self-study, the use of digital dictionaries allows students to quickly compensate for their limitations without halting their learning process.
- **Metacognitive Strategies through Educational YouTube Content:** Choosing to watch English YouTube videos outside class hours shows that students are taking control of their own language input. They use visual and auditory media to deliberately improve their pronunciation and comprehension.
- **Social Strategies through Peer Mentoring:** The communal nature of the Islamic boarding school dormitory serves as an ideal incubator for social strategies. By seeking guidance from more knowledgeable peers, students create a safe, less intimidating sub-environment to practice speaking, effectively lowering their affective filter before performing in front of a larger audience.

Ultimately, while the formal structure of a boarding school imposes high linguistic demands, the informal dormitory space allows senior high school students to exploit digital tools and peer networks to develop highly adaptive, autonomous learning mechanisms

V. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that senior high school students in an Islamic boarding school face intertwined linguistic and non-linguistic challenges that hinder their English speaking proficiency. Linguistically, their performance is constrained by limited vocabulary, poor pronunciation, weak grammatical mastery, and a heavy reliance on literal translation from Indonesian. Non-linguistically, their fluency is disrupted by presentation anxiety, low self-confidence, and a lack of topic familiarity. To overcome these barriers within the dormitory environment, students demonstrate high learner autonomy by employing both direct and indirect Language Learning Strategies (LLS). These include cognitive strategies (repetitive reading), compensation strategies (utilizing digital dictionaries), metacognitive strategies (watching educational YouTube content), and social strategies (peer mentoring). This study is limited to a descriptive qualitative analysis of a single Islamic boarding school, focusing exclusively on senior high school students. Therefore, the findings may not be fully

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generalizable to institutions with different linguistic rules or younger age cohorts. Future researchers are encouraged to conduct quantitative or mixed-method studies with a larger sample size to measure the statistical effectiveness of specific digital tools and peer-mentoring frameworks on students' speaking fluency.

VI. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This academic manuscript has gone through previous stages, including being presented at a seminar and in the form of a research report that has been reviewed by many experts. The author would like to thank the Institute for Research and Community Service (LPPM) of Institute Alif Muhammad Imam Syafi`i (INAMIS), for helping to make this research a success.

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