

An Analysis of Speaking Difficulties Among Class 10B Students at Ahmad Syarifuddin Islamic School

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the difficulties in speaking English among tenth-grade (B) students at Islamic senior high school Ahmad Syarifuddin *tahfidz*, an Islamic boarding school emphasizing *qur'anic* memorization. The research aimed to identify the main challenges students faced, the factors that influenced their speaking difficulties, and how the pesantren environment affected their motivation and opportunities to speak English. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through observations, interviews, and documentation. The findings revealed that students struggled with limited vocabulary, incorrect pronunciation, weak grammar mastery, and low self-confidence. Internal factors such as anxiety and fear of making mistakes, along with external factors like a non-English-speaking environment and limited time due to *tahfidz* activities, significantly hindered speaking development. The study concluded that students' English-speaking abilities were affected by both psychological barriers and the unique constraints of their religious educational setting. The findings were expected to inform educators and institutions about the contextual challenges of language learning in pesantren environments.

Keywords: *Speaking English difficulties, tahfidz pesantren, second language acquisition*

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INTRODUCTION

English, as an international language, plays a crucial role in global communication and has been widely taught in various educational institutions in Indonesia, including religious-based schools. Among the four main language skills listening, speaking, reading, and writing speaking is considered the most important yet the most challenging to master. This skill not only requires mastery of linguistic aspects such as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation but also psychological readiness, including confidence, fluency, and the willingness to communicate. In an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context like Indonesia, limited exposure and practice opportunities make speaking skills even more difficult to develop.

This difficulty becomes even more pronounced in the *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) environment, particularly in *tahfidz* schools that prioritize *Quran* memorization. The students live under a demanding schedule, predominantly using local languages such as Javanese, Madurese, or Indonesian in daily communication, leaving them with very limited opportunities to practice speaking English. At Islamic Senior High School Ahmad Syarifuddin, students in class X-B face multiple challenges in English speaking. Based on research and teacher reports, most students hesitate, frequently pause mid-speech, or even remain silent due to fear of making mistakes, limited vocabulary, and a lack of confidence.

Numerous previous studies have indeed explored the difficulties of speaking English, but most were conducted in mainstream schools rather than in *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools), which have unique characteristics. The *pesantren* education system, with its primary focus on religious studies, time constraints, and the absence of an English-speaking culture, presents distinct

and intriguing challenges that remain understudied in second language acquisition research. This study, therefore, aims to: Identify the specific speaking difficulties faced by Class X-B students, examine the internal and external factors contributing to these challenges, and analyze how the *pesantren* environment which lacks English language support affects students' motivation and opportunities to practice speaking. By delving into the realities of English learning in a *tahfidz pesantren*, this research is expected to provide contextual insights for developing more effective and relevant English teaching strategies in religious-based educational settings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Speaking skills are a primary indicator of success in English language learning, as they reflect students' ability to communicate orally in various contexts. Speaking is not merely about producing sounds (speech) but also involves the use of grammar, vocabulary, and the ability to convey meaning accurately and appropriately. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), such as in Indonesia, the limited interaction in English makes speaking skills a unique challenge for students. According to Nunan (2021), speaking is a productive skill that requires fluency, accuracy, and pragmatic competence in interaction (Nunan, 2021). In environments like Islamic boarding schools, where English practice is rare, students tend to lack familiarity with using the language actively. This results in weak communicative competence, including in sociolinguistic and strategic language use aspects.

Speaking difficulties in an EFL context are generally caused by linguistic and psychological barriers. Linguistically, students often struggle with pronunciation, limited vocabulary, and sentence structure. Pronunciation errors make it difficult for listeners to understand their intended meaning, while a restricted vocabulary limits their ability to express ideas. Poor grasp of grammar further hinders effective message delivery. Psychologically, students experience anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and lack of confidence when speaking. Umisara et al. (2021) state that speaking anxiety stems from the fear of making mistakes and facing negative judgment from others. As a result, students tend to remain silent or avoid speaking attempts, even if they possess basic English knowledge (Umisara et al., 2021).

Anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and low motivation are the primary psychological barriers affecting students' speaking abilities. In Islamic boarding schools, these challenges are exacerbated by the lack of habitual use of English in both academic and social settings. Horwitz et al. (in Burns & Seidlhofer, 2022) argue that foreign language anxiety can disrupt concentration, diminish self-confidence, and hinder students' participation in oral communication (Burns, A., & Seidlhofer, 2022). Moreover, students in *Qur'an* memorization boarding schools (*pesantren tahfidz*) may perceive English as low-priority due to their primary focus on memorizing the *Qur'an*. This results in low learning motivation, directly impacting their effort to improve speaking skills. *Pesantren tahfidz* differ significantly from conventional formal schools. With students' central focus on *Qur'anic* memorization, time and attention allocated to English lessons are minimal. Factors such as: dense religious activities, predominant use of local languages in daily life, and lack of speaking practice, collectively hinder the development of students' speaking proficiency. Jahrani and Listia (2023) explain that low exposure to English in daily life is a primary inhibiting factor in second language acquisition (Jahrani & Listia, 2023).

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design, aiming to gain an in-depth understanding of the difficulties in speaking English among students at a *tahfidz* Islamic boarding school. This design allows for the exploration of complex real-world conditions, particularly in a learning environment characterized by religious traditions and minimal exposure to English. The research was conducted at Islamic Senior High School Ahmad Syarifuddin, a *tahfidz*-based Islamic boarding school in Probolinggo, East Java. The focus was directed at 10th-grade students (Class X-B), selected because they represent the daily context of *tahfidz* students with very limited foreign language exposure. The main participants consisted of four female students, purposively selected based on their availability and engagement in the English learning process.

Data collection was conducted through three primary sources: Interviews with students using open-ended questions to explore their personal experiences in overcoming English-speaking barriers and their perceptions of the learning environment, classroom observations documenting students' verbal interactions during oral activities (reading aloud, answering questions, and practicing simple conversations) (Jamshed, 2014). Non-verbal expressions (confidence or anxiety cues) were also recorded, documentation, including copies of the *pesantren's* activity schedule, student worksheets, and photographs of relevant learning activities. Data analysis followed an inductive thematic approach. The process involved: Transcription and systematic organization of all collected data, Coding based on thematic categories (language barriers, psychological pressure, and environmental influences), Pattern identification to examine consistencies or contradictions across participants. Interpretation was contextualized within the *pesantren's* cultural and structural framework, ensuring findings remained grounded in students' lived realities. Validity was ensured through: Triangulation across data sources (interviews, observations, documents), Periodic cross-checking of field notes and interview responses. This approach allowed the analysis to move beyond surface-level symptoms and uncover root causes within the religious educational institution's unique context.

RESULTS

This study reveals various difficulties experienced by 10th-grade students (Class X-B) at Ahmad Syarifuddin Islamic Senior High School in speaking English within the *tahfizh* (*Quran* memorization) boarding school environment. Data was collected through classroom observations, in-depth interviews with four students, and documentation in the form of learning activity photos and subject schedules. Based on the data analysis, students' speaking difficulties were categorized into three main aspects: linguistic challenges, psychological factors, and an unsupportive learning environment. Linguistic Challenges: Limited Vocabulary and Pronunciation Errors, from classroom observations, it was evident that most students struggled to answer the teacher's questions orally. They were unable to respond in complete sentences, with some only managing to say one or two fragmented words. Even when asked to read a text aloud in turns, many students hesitated in pronunciation and frequently paused to seek validation from the teacher. Interviews with the students confirmed that limited vocabulary was the most significant barrier. They reported not knowing the English equivalents for basic ideas or concepts, making them unconfident in forming sentences or engaging in simple conversations.

Speaking difficulties are not solely influenced by linguistic factors but also by significant psychological pressures. Observations revealed that when asked to speak, students often displayed signs of anxiety such as nervous laughter, avoiding eye contact, or looking down. Some even refused to speak in front of the class, despite seemingly understanding the material. In-depth interviews highlighted low self-confidence as the primary issue. Students admitted feeling insecure when required to speak in English, especially due to fears of being mocked for grammar or pronunciation mistakes. The embarrassment of potential negative evaluation from teachers or peers made them passive in speaking activities, both inside and outside the classroom. Mispronunciation and Reluctance to Speak Additionally, mispronunciation further discouraged students from speaking. Many confessed feeling embarrassed if their pronunciation sounded strange or incorrect to their peers, leading them to stay silent rather than attempt speaking. This demonstrates how deficiencies in basic language skills such as vocabulary mastery and accurate pronunciation hinder students' fluency and confidence in verbal communication.

Environmental Constraints: Limited Time and Lack of Language Practice Support, the learning environment further exacerbated students' speaking difficulties. Ahmad Syarifuddin Islamic Senior High School operates under a *tahfizh* (*Quran* memorization) boarding school system, meaning most of the students' time is dedicated to religious activities, particularly *Quranic* recitation. Documentation of their daily schedule revealed that free time was extremely limited. School classes were held in the morning, followed by *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) activities until evening, leaving almost no opportunity for independent English language practice. Anxiety Rooted in Perception of English as "Difficult" and "Intimidating" the anxiety experienced by students was also

tied to their perception of English as a "difficult" and "frightening" subject rather than a communication tool to be practiced regularly. This highlights how affective factors such as fear, shyness, and low self-esteem directly contribute to students' reluctance to speak English.

Beyond the three main factors linguistic limitations, psychological pressure, and environmental constraints this study also uncovered several supporting findings that reinforce a holistic picture of students' speaking difficulties. First, regarding student participation in class, most students tended to remain passive when asked to respond in English. Even when teachers attempted to prompt them with simple questions or dialogues, only a handful dared to answer. This suggests that, beyond technical factors like vocabulary and confidence, students are also unaccustomed to interactive learning models emphasizing oral engagement. Second, teachers' instructional strategies indirectly influenced students' speaking abilities. Based on documentation and observations, teachers still predominantly relied on lecture-based methods and reading exercises, with minimal time allocated to active speaking practice. Although the teaching materials (student worksheets) supported speaking development, their implementation was not yet optimized to encourage students' language production. Third, there were indications that some students possessed intrinsic motivation to learn English, but it was poorly channeled due to a lack of systemic support. For instance, students eager to improve pronunciation or expand vocabulary often lacked access to additional learning resources or environments conducive to independent practice, such as conversation spaces or peer tutoring. This stunted the full development of their learning potential. Finally, a concerning trend emerged: students viewed English more as an academic burden than a communication skill.

DISCUSSION

Based on the research findings involving observation and interviews with 10th-grade students (Class X-B) at Ahmad Syarifuddin Tahfidz Islamic Senior High School, it was found that most students experienced a high level of difficulty in speaking English. This conclusion was drawn from direct observation of students' performance in class and their statements during interviews, which revealed a gap between their understanding of the material and their actual ability to express ideas orally. The primary challenge faced by students was limited vocabulary. Most admitted struggling to convey their ideas due to a lack of knowledge of English word equivalents. This suggests that the vocabulary input received during lessons had not been fully internalized. Umisara (2021) states that vocabulary mastery is the foundational element of speaking skills the richer a student's vocabulary, the more fluent their speaking ability becomes (Umisara et al., 2021). Additionally, self-confidence emerged as another major obstacle. Students reported fear of making mistakes, being laughed at, or receiving negative evaluations from teachers and peers. This psychological pressure hindered them from speaking spontaneously. Emphasizes that anxiety and low self-confidence are the most significant affective factors impacting speaking performance in English language learning.

From an environmental perspective, the use of English outside the classroom remains very limited. Although the students reside in a *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) environment that supports formal education, English is not practiced naturally in their daily lives. As Canagarajah (2023) explains, language skills develop optimally when practiced continuously and are not confined to classroom settings (Canagarajah, 2023). During observations, despite the teacher implementing interactive methods such as Q&A sessions and presentations, some students remained passive and disengaged in conversations. This could be attributed to a combination of the previously mentioned internal and external factors. For instance, students with limited vocabulary and low self-confidence tended not to respond, even if they theoretically understood the topic being discussed. Interviews further revealed that students felt they lacked sufficient opportunities to practice speaking actively. They were more frequently involved in listening or writing activities, while speaking tasks occurred only occasionally primarily during presentations or when answering the teacher's questions. This indicates that speaking skills have not yet become a central focus in their daily learning activities. Overall, it can be concluded that students' difficulties in speaking English are influenced by: Linguistic factors (limited vocabulary and grasp of grammar), affective factors (anxiety and lack of confidence), and environmental factors (minimal exposure and practice outside the classroom).

Thus, improving students' speaking skills in this *pesantren* requires a comprehensive teaching approach, including: Intensive speaking practice, enhanced motivation strategies, and the creation of a supportive learning environment that encourages active and natural English use.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings regarding students of class X-B at Ahmad Syarifuddin Islamic Senior High School in the context of a *tahfidz* (*Quran* memorization) boarding school, it was discovered that their difficulties in speaking English stem from a complex interplay of linguistic limitations, psychological pressure, and a learning environment that does not actively support English usage. This study proves that mastery of speaking skills does not solely depend on technical language proficiency but is also heavily influenced by affective, social, and structural factors surrounding the students. From the linguistic aspect, students face significant hurdles in vocabulary mastery and pronunciation. Observations revealed that most students were unable to express their ideas in complete sentences, often responding only with fragmented words or short phrases. These difficulties were exacerbated by insufficient practice in sentence structure formation and weak grammatical understanding. Such limitations not only hinder fluency but also erode students' confidence in attempting to communicate. In the *tahfidz* context, students are rarely exposed to everyday English vocabulary, as their curriculum focuses more on religious studies and memorization (of the *Quran*), leaving little room for practical language acquisition.

Psychological aspects also play a highly influential role. When asked to speak in front of the class, students exhibited signs of anxiety such as nervous laughter, avoiding eye contact, looking down, or outright refusing to speak. Fear of making mistakes, worry about being mocked, and social pressure led them to evade speaking activities, even in learning situations meant to encourage active participation. This demonstrates that creating an emotionally safe learning environment is crucial for boosting students' confidence in speaking. The learning environment in the *tahfidz* boarding school, though rich in spiritual and religious growth, does not optimally support English language development. Students' packed daily schedules filled with religious activities like (*Quran* revision), memorization recitations, and routine Quranic studies leave minimal time for foreign language learning. Moreover, daily interactions are dominated by local languages and Indonesian, not English. As a result, students lack sufficient opportunities to actively practice English, whether in formal or informal contexts. Additionally, limited supporting resources such as conversation spaces, English discussion forums, and scarce access to self-learning tools (audiovisual materials or digital dictionaries) further hinder their speaking skill development.

Furthermore, this study also reveals that the teaching methods employed by educators have not fully facilitated the development of students' speaking skills. Classroom activities remain heavily focused on reading, writing, and one-way lecture-style instruction. Although teachers have made attempts to incorporate Q&A sessions and presentations, their frequency remains insufficient. Some students even demonstrated intrinsic motivation to learn, yet this motivation lacks adequate channels or institutional support within the *pesantren's* educational system. These findings collectively indicate that students' difficulties in speaking English do not stem solely from individual shortcomings but rather reflect systemic limitations in the learning structure, curriculum design, and the daily routines of the *tahfidz* *pesantren* environment. To address these challenges, a holistic approach is required, targeting three key levels: Linguistic Reinforcement: Thematic vocabulary instruction, pronunciation training, implementation of communicative, practice-based learning strategies. Psychological Support: Cultivating a safe learning atmosphere, recognizing and validating student efforts, reducing social pressures that inhibit participation. Conducive Learning Environment: initiatives like "English Day" programs, peer conversation forums, enhanced technology-integrated learning tools. By addressing these interconnected dimensions, the study proposes a framework to transform passive learners into confident English speakers within the unique context of *tahfidz* education.

By providing an in-depth understanding of students' difficulties in speaking English within the *tahfidz* *pesantren* environment, this study is expected to serve as a reference for teachers, *pesantren* administrators, and education policymakers in designing more adaptive and contextual learning

approaches. The success of English language learning does not solely depend on classroom instruction, but also on how students are given opportunities, support, and the courage to use the language in real-life situations. Therefore, transforming the pesantren's learning culture to be more open to foreign language practice has become an urgent necessity to holistically enhance students' English proficiency.

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