Exploring Students' English-Speaking Ability Across Proficiency Levels: A Case Study in an Indonesian Islamic Boarding School

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ABSTRACT

Speaking plays an important role in empowering students learning English as a foreign language to actively engage in various aspects of academic life, such as classroom discussions, presentations, and group projects. However, fluency in English speaking remains a significant challenge for many Indonesian students due to limited exposure to authentic English-speaking environments and insufficient practice opportunities. The aims of this study are to find out the environmental exposure in an Islamic boarding school. Besides, this study also explores the students' perceptions across proficiency levels in increasing their English-speaking ability in that boarding school. Descriptive qualitative design was used in this study. Observation and interview as the instrument to gain the data were administered in one of Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia. The observation was done to investigate the extent of the English exposure while interview was delivered to 12 students across proficiency levels. The result showed that activities provided by the institution in fostering students' confidence and fluency are *muhadloroh*, *muhadatsah*, and English Day. Those activities play a pivotal role, allowing them to practice speaking in both formal and informal settings. Additionally, peer interactions and consistent exposure to English in daily routines contribute to building communicative competence and reducing language anxiety as the students' effort in increasing their English speaking ability.

INTRODUCTION

English-speaking ability is a fundamental component of communication competence in today's globalized world. As English continues to serve as the dominant lingua franca across international business, academia, diplomacy, and digital communication, the ability to speak it effectively has become a vital skill for learners worldwide (Agustina et al., 2024).The ability to communicate allows students to express their ideas, to do questions and answer, and to be active in discussion in English language. This is to engage students in various aspects of academic life, such as classroom discussions, presentations, and group projects. Participating in those activities makes students not only improve their academic performance but also develop critical thinking (Aslan & Şahin, 2020; Nisa Aldira Lubis et al., 2024; Rana & Shaikh, 2024). Those activities can be done in a group or with peers so that they can improve their fluency in speaking, they as well can build self-confidence (Aubrey et al., 2020; Ayiz & Tauchid, 2025; Hadijah, 2014) , prepare them for future professional (Kotkavuori, 2025) and social interactions (Nety et al., 2020).

Furthermore, speaking is a real challenge for some Indonesian students. This happened because of limited exposure in our environment (Andriani et al., 2024). Sometimes the students do not find a good example of pronouncing words (Yulianti et al., 2025). Speaking become a big challenge for some students and even stated that through speaking, it can be seen their proficiency as (Rana & Shaikh, 2024) stated that the performance of students' speaking is influenced by their proficiency levels. The lack of immersive and practical experiences in using the language hinders their ability to develop proficiency (Nisa Aldira Lubis et al., 2024). Proficiency in spoken English is not merely about vocabulary or grammar—it encompasses fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, interactional competence, and the ability to convey ideas clearly and appropriately in diverse contexts.

As has long been stated by El-Koumy (2004) and also stated by Tante (2018), in order to improve students' English speaking skills in boarding schools, various activities may be done such as by discussion, presentation, role-play, debate, that vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation might develop students' confidence in communicating in English that in these interactive activities, students are encouraged to improve their speaking skills. With this conceptual framework, boarding schools can develop an effective English program to improve students' speaking skills and prepare them to interact with the international world.

An English speaking environment exposure can make a unique contribution to a student's ability in English speaking in several ways; one of which is having ample opportunities to practice speaking, listening, and interacting in English. This might also build student's confidence in interacting regularly with others that can develop their fluency and improve ability to express themselves effecviely and reduce anxiety. By providing students with a supportive and immersive environment exposure, English speaking can help them develop the skills and confidence they need to become proficient English speakers (Rojas, 2022).

Islamic boarding schools can be categorized into three types (Arif et al., 2024). The first is the *salaf* or traditional model, characterized by a non-formal education system that heavily relies on yellow books as the primary source of learning. The second is the modern model, which adopts a more formal approach, incorporating structured curricula and organized learning processes. The third type is the integrated model, which combines elements of both the traditional and modern systems by utilizing yellow books for religious studies while also implementing government-approved curricula and structured learning processes. In this context, a common thread across the three categories of Islamic boarding schools is their emphasis on creating an immersive environment for learning and personal development. Besides, informal and oral traditions of the salaf schools, the structured curricula of modern schools, or the hybrid approach of integrated schools, all these institutions provide opportunities for students to engage in active learning and practice. Their communal and interactive settings foster peer-to-peer communication and allow students to develop confidence and fluency (Ayiz & Tauchid, 2025). Collaborative learning strategies also play a crucial role in improving speaking ability. Group discussions, role-playing, debates, and project-based learning activities encourage learners to use English in authentic, communicative contexts. These interactive methods promote not just speaking fluency but also pragmatic competence—the ability to use language appropriately based on social and cultural cues. Recent classroom-based research (Laila, 2019) ademonstrates that students who engage in group speaking activities tend to show improved vocabulary use, greater grammatical control, and stronger communication confidence.

There are some problems raised in English speaking difficulties in Islamic boarding school First, students in Islamic boarding schools confront a mesh of linguistic limitations like lack of vocabulary, afraid of the grammar correctness, and not a good pronunciation (Alim, 2023)**. S**econd, contextual gaps. This gap is limited usage opportunities and dominance of Arabic use, and the last is institutional weaknesses such as inadequate materials and teacher expertise which. Addressing these requires systemic reforms to enrich interactive and meaningful oral communication among learners through integrating immersive speaking practice, strengthening teacher training, and supplying relevant English-language resources.

Regarding English ability in Islamic boarding schools, it has been studied by some scholars. First is a study conducted by (Alim, 2023). This study aims to determine the problem of speaking in one Islamic boarding school in Majalengka. Using qualitative descriptive method in class IX students of At-tadzkir Islamic Boarding School, the findings show that the problems faced by the students are shyness, grammar, vocabulary and meaning, pronunciation, lack of confidence, fear of making mistakes, and anxiety. Saud et al. (2023) for instance, examined the influence of the environment on students' second language acquisition but did not provide an in-depth discussion on fluency in English speaking. Similarly, (Fitria, 2023) focused on identifying effective teaching methods for second language instruction in Islamic boarding schools but did not address fluency as a specific area of inquiry. Furthermore, (Sofyan et al., 2023) investigated the challenges faced by students in acquiring English language skills within the unique setting of Islamic boarding schools, yet their study overlooked the aspect of fluency and how it manifests in this context.

This research aims to fill the gap by delving into the underexplored area of English-speaking fluency in Islamic boarding schools, particularly analyzing English speaking ability across different proficiency levels in Islamic boarding school setting. Therefore, this research goal is to examine how far the environmental exposure in Islamic boarding school and the students across proficiency levels' perceptions on the Islamic boarding school's program.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research method to explore students' English-speaking ability across different proficiency levels in an Islamic boarding school setting. This case study method provides rich, detailed insights into how the Islamic boarding school environment fosters students' confidence and proficiency in speaking English. The choice of this method aligns with the study's aim to capture the nuanced experiences, attitudes, and practices of students in islamic boarding school, which quantitative approaches may overlook. Moreover, qualitative research is well-suited for uncovering the social and cultural dimensions of language use, which are integral to understanding the role of Islamic boarding schools in improving students' speaking ability.

The subjects of this study are all students from an Islamic boarding school in MA Al-islah, Paciran, Lamongan, Indonesia. The students are categorized into three levels of English proficiency: advance, intermediate, and beginner. The English proficiency was categorized on the placement test. The test was given when the students starts grade XI. Students who scored between 81–90 were classified as advanced, indicating strong communicative competence and minimal hesitation in spoken interaction. Scores ranging from 71–80 were categorized as intermediate, representing moderate fluency and accuracy with occasional hesitation. Those who scored between 60–70 was categorized as beginners, typically showing limited vocabulary use, frequent pauses, and noticeable difficulty in pronunciation and grammar. All students from grade

XI were observed and 12 students were willing to be interviewed. The choice of XI-grade students is deliberate, as they are at a critical stage of language development where foundational skills have been established, yet there is still room for significant progress before graduation. This grade level also represents a period when students are actively engaged in both academic and extracurricular activities. Brief information about participant is served in Table 1.

Table 1. Information about participants

No.	Initial	Role	Proficiency Level	Score
1.	AA	Student	Advance	90
2.	AB	Student	Advance	88
3.	AC	Student	Advance	88
4	AD	Student	Advance	85
5	BA	Student	Intermediate	78
6	BB	Student	Intermediate	77
7	BC	Student	Intermediate	75
8	BD	Student	Intermediate	74
9	CA	Student	Beginner	69
10	CB	Student	Beginner	67
11	CC	Student	Beginner	66
12	CD	Student	Beginner	66

The instruments used in this study were observation and interview. Observation was done to see the neutral activities in the boarding school. What activities are provided by the institution to give more exposure in speaking English were observed. The interview was designed to elicit detailed responses from participants about their experiences, challenges, and strategies related to speaking ability. How the students' effort in increasing their speaking ability was also dug through interview. The participants were informed that their privacy and identity during the interview were kept secret that the information obtained from them were objective and fair. Their information would be used solely as data of the present research and made sure that they were not be used for other purposes.

Data collection was from the boarding school administration. Informed consent was secured from all participants to ensure voluntary participation and confidentiality. Observations were carried out during boarding school program such as English classes, speaking clubs, debates, and informal conversations, allowing the researcher to capture real-time examples of speaking ability development and interaction patterns. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were conducted with students and each participant lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was audio-recorded with consent.

The data collected were analyzed using thematic analysis. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, and observation notes and document excerpts were organized systematically. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-step framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006), beginning with familiarization through repeated readings of the data, followed by coding and the generation of initial themes. These themes were reviewed and refined by linking them back to the research questions and the overall data set. Patterns and relationships across different data sources were identified to provide a comprehensive understanding of how students' speaking ability varies across proficiency levels and how the boarding school environment supports their development.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Islamic Boarding School Program as a good exposure of students speaking ability. Based on the observation result, the immersive pesantren or Islamic boarding school environment is instrumental in cultivating English-speaking habits. Those programs found in this study were *muhadloroh*, *muhadatsah*, and English Day.

Muhadloroh (Public Speech)

This program is held once a week, on Thursdays. Students should demonstrate a speech in Englis every week. There is a schedule for whom to present the speech. The topic is already set by the mentor. The topic usually based on the Islamic issues such as *Hadist* of humanity, *hadist* of *ramadan* or Islamic holy days. All the students have the same opportunity to present their speech. The students should write or draft their speech, and the mentor give feedback on their writing.

By incorporating public speaking or *muhadloro*h into a compulsory program in this Islamic boarding school can empower students to become confident, articulate, and effective communicators, equipped to share their knowledge and inspire others in their communities. This finding is in line with (Altuwairesh, 2017a) that found consistency and deliberate practice is crucial for building proficiency and confidence and this effort can overcome barriers to active language use. Moreover, this study also show that most of the students enjoy the process. This finding support (Putri et al., 2020a) that identified several factors that positively impact students' speaking ability, such as an enjoyable learning process, strong self-motivation, and peer support. Focused practice helps students master English by reinforcing skills through repeated exposure, feedback, and adjustment, improving accuracy and cognitive pathways for fluency.

In language-rich environments, repeated practice enhances the automaticity of complex language structures, allowing more natural communication. (Pratiwi et al., 2020a) also noted that immersion environment significantly boosts fluency by surrounding learners with the target language in daily activities. This setting encourages active language use across various contexts, helping learners transition from passive comprehension to active communication. Frequent real-time practice provides immediate feedback, refining pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. By using meaningfully, students become more comfortable, confident, and precise, making immersive environments a strong foundation for comprehensive language proficiency.

Muhadatsah (Conversation)

Muhadatsah/conversation is a program that is held every morning. After morning prayer, the students should stand and do conversation in pairs. The general topic is provided by the mentor such as things around us, kitchen, occupation and so on. All the students have the same time communicating with each other at the same time. They should speak English along this program. No mother tongue allows in this program, since one mentor assists 10 pairs of students so that no students speak except English.

This program allows the students to speak in pairs, talking to friends is easier than talking to the teacher. This finding similar to (Ishak, 2024a) that states peer interaction in boarding schools is another fundamental aspect that enhances language acquisition. Living within a close-knit community of peers who often share similar academic goals fosters a natural environment for language use. Within this program, students engage in regular, spontaneous conversations, and allows them to practice English in authentic and meaningful ways. This informal use of language is critical for building communicative competence, as it encourages students to experiment with language, try out new vocabulary, and practice speaking without the formal pressures of a

classroom. This finding similar to the (Zadorozhnyy & Lee, 2025) research that stated e good enviromnet makes the students express their idea well. Furthermore, the constant interaction with peers strengthens students' confidence in using English, as they receive ongoing, informal feedback and develop a sense of ease and comfort when speaking the language. This related to the study done by (Huang, 2023) that found that informal setting may help students to feel comfortable and show freedom of expression.

English Day

English day is one of the Al-Islah Islamic boarding school programs that provided specific day that force students to speak English along day. Usually, this program is held three days a week (Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday). The structured routines inherent in boarding schools further support language development by promoting regular and intentional practice. From morning assemblies to study periods that designed by boarding schools offer students a regimented schedule that ensures consistent exposure to the target language throughout the day. These routines help students develop a disciplined approach to language learning, encouraging them to actively use English across various settings. This finding is in line with (Amiruddin, Evha Nazalatus, et al., 2022) that found consistent practice in such structured environments helps solidify language skills, as students continuously apply what they learn in real-time situations like mentioned by. This regularity and structure cultivate both familiarity and confidence, allowing students to navigate complex language tasks with greater ease.

The controlled nature of boarding schools helps minimize distractions, creating a focused learning environment where students can prioritize language learning more effectively. In a boarding school, distractions from the outside world are often reduced, allowing students to channel their energy into academic and personal growth. This focused environment not only strengthens academic discipline but also supports consistent language practice, which is crucial for developing language proficiency. By reducing distractions, boarding schools can create a learning atmosphere where students feel comfortable engaging in language practice, knowing that their peers and teachers are also immersed in similar goals and routines. This sense of shared purpose and commitment to learning enhances students' motivation and contributes to a collective learning culture that is highly beneficial for language acquisition.

Students' perceptions on Islamic boarding school program

The immersive environment of the Islamic boarding school plays a central role in shaping students' English-speaking development. Through structured programs such as muhadloroh (public speech), muhadatsah (daily conversation), and English Day, students across different proficiency levels are provided with authentic opportunities to practice speaking English in both formal and informal settings. Thematic analysis of observations and interviews revealed four major themes: (1) Confidence through structured public speaking, (2) Peer support in spontaneous speaking, (3) Habitual language use through institutional routine, and (4) Inclusiveness across proficiency levels.

Confidence through Structured Public Speaking

The muhadloroh program, held weekly, engages students in delivering speeches in English on assigned Islamic topics. Advanced students in particular benefit from this structure, as it encourages the development of coherent and organized speech. One student noted, "Muhadloroh made me get used to organizing my arguments more systematically. After performing a few times,

I started to be able to speak without thinking too much first." (AA). This practice aligns with (Altuwairesh, 2017b) argument that deliberate, repeated speaking tasks help reduce anxiety and increase fluency. The structure of muhadloroh—preparation, drafting, and mentor feedback—enables students to progress from scripted to spontaneous speaking. Furthermore, students' enjoyment of the activity supports (Putri et al., 2020b) claim that positive affect and peer motivation play a critical role in speaking development.

Peer Support in Spontaneous Speaking

The muhadatsah program, conducted daily after morning prayer, provides a relaxed setting for pair conversations. Intermediate students particularly find this activity meaningful, as it encourages spontaneous language use without fear of making mistakes: "When discussing during muhadatsah, we are free to speak without being too afraid of making mistakes. The relaxed atmosphere makes me more confident because I know my friends are still learning." (BB). This reflects Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, where peer interaction serves as a scaffold for language acquisition. (Ishak, 2024b) also highlights how daily peer communication promotes natural language development. In this environment, students can experiment with vocabulary and structures without teacher evaluation, which contributes to internalizing speaking habits more effectively.

Habitual Language Use through Institutional Routine

The English Day program, implemented three times a week, immerses students in English across all daily activities. For beginner learners, this environment reduces the barrier of speaking anxiety: "At first I felt shy to speak English, but during English Day, I felt that everyone should speak English, so I dared to try even if it was only a short sentence." (CA). By integrating English into regular routines, English Day supports habit formation—key to long-term fluency. This finding resonates with (Amiruddin, Sa'adiyah Sy, et al., 2022), who emphasize the importance of consistency and repetition in language development. Furthermore, the minimized distractions and shared goals among students in the boarding school foster a focused and disciplined setting that facilitates the automaticity of language use (Pratiwi et al., 2020b).

Inclusiveness across Proficiency Levels

Perhaps the most unique value of the pesantren context is the inclusive atmosphere it creates. English Day brings together students from all levels in the same speaking environment. According to the English teacher "English Day was very effective because there was no level division there. All students, both advanced and beginners, spoke English. This helped reduce anxiety and created a good atmosphere." (TT)

This observation confirms that a sense of communal obligation and shared struggle enhances students' willingness to speak. Peer modeling and mutual encouragement break down hierarchies of proficiency, supporting Krashen's emphasis on low-anxiety input environments.

Advanced students demonstrate a strong command of spoken English, particularly excelling in formal environments such as muhadloroh. They frequently take the lead in group discussions, showcasing both fluency and coherence in their speech. Intermediate students perform commendably in interactive tasks like muhadatsah, readily engaging in discussions despite making occasional errors. Their willingness to communicate is a key characteristic. In contrast, beginner students typically start with some hesitation but progressively increase their participation during structured activities like English Day and in informal interactions with peers.

The findings underscore that a balanced combination of structured programs (e.g., muhadloroh), informal peer support (e.g., muhadatsah), and inclusive immersion (e.g., English Day) collectively facilitates speaking development across proficiency levels. These results align with Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, demonstrating that both exposure and meaningful interaction are vital in developing speaking skills. They also contribute new insights to previous studies (Alim, 2023; Fitria, 2023; Saud et al., 2023) by showing how different levels of proficiency interact uniquely with institutional routines and social dynamics in the pesantren environment.

The thematic findings above demonstrate that each English-speaking program in the pesantren—Muhadloroh, Muhadatsah, and English Day—offers specific benefits aligned with students' proficiency levels. While these programs are designed for all students, their impact varies depending on learners' readiness, confidence, and fluency. To further clarify these relationships, Table 2 summarizes how students across different levels engaged with the three main activities. The table captures observed behaviors, reported benefits, and selected student voices, alongside theoretical connections that support the interpretation of each activity's role in developing speaking skills.

Table 2. Students' perceptions on Islamic boarding school program

Activity	Proficiency Level		
	Advanced	Intermediate	Beginner
Muhadloroh	Fluent and confident in structured speech; focuses on delivery, coherence, and tone. Gains from mentor feedback and repeated practice. "I started to be able to speak without thinking too much first." (AA)	Begins to move from written text to natural delivery; focuses on building coherence; still relies on draft or outline.	Relies on memorization; feels anxious at first but learns by observing peers. Repetition increases familiarity and participation. (Peer modeling; Affective Filter)
Muhadatsah	Supports peers in informal settings; adjusts register based on context; refines fluency through repeated interaction.	Communicates actively with peers; tolerates mistakes and improves through real-time interaction. "The relaxed atmosphere makes me more confident…" (BB)	Initially quiet or hesitant; gains confidence by mimicking peers; starts using simple expressions over time.
English day	Leads conversations naturally; reinforces informal fluency; uses English across varied contexts.	Applies classroom knowledge in daily routines; builds automaticity and confidence through habitual use. (Language internalization)	Encouraged to speak due to shared obligation; starts with short phrases in supportive atmosphere. "I dared to try even if it was only a short sentence." (CA)

Table 2. shows us beginner students respond positively to inclusive and low-anxiety environments like English Day, which encourages them to participate despite limited vocabulary or fluency. Intermediate learners benefit from spontaneous, peer-based conversations provided by Muhadatsah, which help reduce anxiety and build communicative competence in informal settings.

Meanwhile, advanced students thrive in structured and cognitively demanding tasks such as Muhadloroh, where they develop coherence, argumentation, and confidence in public speaking.

These differentiated responses illustrate a clear progression of speaking development across proficiency levels—from simple participation to spontaneous interaction and, eventually, structured output. This trajectory reflects a scaffolded learning environment, where students are supported at each stage of growth through consistent exposure and varied speaking opportunities. The findings demonstrate how contextually embedded immersion practices can be leveraged to enhance speaking proficiency in Islamic boarding school settings.

Overall, the pesantren environment provides rich opportunities for students of all levels of proficiency to practice and develop their speaking skills. Structured activities such as *muhadloroh* and *muhadatsah*, coupled with familiarization through English Day, provide equal opportunities for all students to improve their speaking fluency. This supportive pesantren environment not only helps students feel more confident but also creates an inclusive atmosphere where speaking English becomes part of their daily lives.

CONCLUSION

This study makes a distinctive contribution to existing literature by exploring how proficiency level shapes student perception and engagement in immersive language activities within a religious boarding school context—an area that has been underrepresented in previous research. While many studies examine challenges in pesantren English education, this study focuses on how structured exposure is internalized differently by beginner, intermediate, and advanced learners, offering a more nuanced view of speaking development in EFL contexts.

The findings of this study offer several practical implications for educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers in Islamic boarding schools and similar language learning contexts. First, it is essential to design differentiated speaking activities that align with students' proficiency levels. For instance, beginner and intermediate learners benefit more from informal and supportive speaking routines like muhadatsah, while advanced learners are more engaged and challenged through structured activities such as muhadloroh. Second, institutions should foster peer collaboration across proficiency levels, allowing higher-level students to support and model effective speaking for their peers in less formal settings. This peer-led interaction not only promotes language development but also builds mutual confidence. Third, embedding daily English exposure through initiatives like English Day encourages habitual language use, making English communication part of students' everyday lives rather than limited to classroom boundaries. Teachers should also receive targeted training to address students' speaking anxiety, utilizing scaffolding techniques such as guided conversations and speaking prompts. Finally, policymakers are encouraged to support the development of contextualized speaking materials and promote school-wide policies that emphasize fluency, communicative competence, and meaningful interaction rather than solely focusing on grammar and accuracy.

Future research could expand on these findings by exploring longitudinal changes in students' speaking fluency as they progress through different proficiency levels and academic years. Studies involving multiple pesantren from diverse regions, as well as those employing mixed-method approaches, would offer broader perspectives and enhance the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, investigating the roles of teacher facilitation and parental involvement in

speaking development could further enrich the understanding of language acquisition in immersive school settings.

This study was limited to one Islamic boarding school in East Java, with a relatively small sample size. The data relied primarily on student perspectives and observational analysis; it did not include formal classroom-based speaking assessments or comprehensive input from teachers and parents. These limitations should be addressed in future research to strengthen the depth and scope of inquiry into speaking skill development in similar contexts.

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