Strategies Used by Language Mentors to Encourage Students to Speak English

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Abstract

Oral communication in English poses a persistent difficulty for many junior high school learners in Islamic boarding school contexts, where formal instruction alone proves insufficient to build communicative confidence. This qualitative descriptive study examines how language mentors at MTsN 1 Kebumen — an Islamic boarding school in Central Java — facilitate English speaking development through mentoring practices embedded in dormitory life. Data were gathered via non-participant observation across twelve mentoring sessions, semi-structured interviews with six language mentors, and relevant documentation. Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2022) was employed to interpret the data. Three overarching mentoring strategy categories emerged: enforcing an immersive English-only environment during daily activities, conducting structured communicative sessions encompassing role play, storytelling, and group discussion, and applying affective approaches such as verbal encouragement, indirect corrective feedback, and trust-based mentoring relationships. These practices were found to meaningfully raise learners' willingness to communicate and reduce speaking-related anxiety. Recurring obstacles included peer-related embarrassment, lexical limitations, and fluctuating learner motivation. The study highlights the untapped potential of Islamic boarding school mentors as agents of communicative English development and offers pedagogical implications for pesantren-based language programs in Indonesia.

Keywords: EFL speaking; Islamic boarding school; language mentors; speaking strategies; willingness to communicate

INTRODUCTION

Speaking is widely recognized as one of the most essential skills in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The ability to communicate verbally in English enables students to express their ideas, interact with others, and participate in broader communication contexts. However, many EFL students, particularly at the junior high school level, still struggle with speaking due to low confidence, limited vocabulary, fear of making mistakes, and insufficient opportunities to practice (Leong & Ahmadi, 2021).

In Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) settings, the challenge of encouraging students to speak English takes on a unique dimension. Students live on campus full-time, which provides a potentially rich environment for immersive language practice. At MTsN 1 Kebumen, an Islamic boarding school in Kebumen Regency, Central Java, language mentors interact with students extensively and are directly responsible for implementing English language activities as part of their Islamic boarding school program. This continuous proximity gives language mentors a distinctive advantage in creating immersive English-speaking opportunities beyond the formal classroom.

Previous studies have examined speaking strategies used by teachers in formal classrooms (Widiati et al., 2023; Wijaya, 2023). However, limited research has specifically explored strategies used by language mentors in Islamic boarding school environments. This gap justifies the present study. Guided by the Willingness to Communicate (WTC) framework (Auliyah & Sujannah, 2023; Gao et al., 2024) and communicative language teaching principles, this study therefore aims to: (1) identify the strategies used by language mentors at MTsN 1 Kebumen to encourage students to speak English, (2) analyze how those strategies influence students' willingness to speak, and (3) examine the challenges faced by language mentors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language Mentors and Speaking in Islamic Boarding Schools

A language mentor is an individual who guides and supports learners in developing communicative competence through sustained interaction, encouragement, and tailored support outside of formal instructional contexts (Rusdin & Purwati, 2023). In Islamic boarding schools such as MTsN 1 Kebumen, language mentors occupy a distinctive role as they interact with students throughout the day, far beyond formal classroom hours, making them uniquely positioned to shape students' daily language habits. Putri and Amri (2022) identified speaking problems among Indonesian EFL learners including hesitation, code-switching, and avoidance of speaking tasks. Rusdin and Purwati (2023) further found that when language facilitators in Islamic schools actively support English speaking practice, students demonstrate significantly greater motivation and oral participation.

Willingness to Communicate (WTC)

Willingness to Communicate (WTC) refers to a learner's readiness and intention to initiate communication in a second language at a given moment. Gao et al. (2024), through a systematic review of classroom-based instructional practices, confirmed that WTC is dynamically shaped by communicative confidence, motivation, and the perceived safety of the speaking context. In the Indonesian context, Auliyah and Sujannah (2023) found that a supportive environment and positive mentor-student relationships were the most significant contributors to students' WTC. Abrar et al. (2022) further confirmed that speaking anxiety — stemming from fear of mistakes, limited vocabulary, and low self-confidence — remains a major barrier to EFL speaking participation in Indonesia.

Strategies to Encourage EFL Speaking

Research has identified a range of effective strategies for promoting oral English use among EFL learners. Wijaya (2023) argued that creating a low-anxiety learning atmosphere and incorporating enjoyable speaking activities are foundational to reducing speaking anxiety and encouraging oral participation among Indonesian EFL learners. Widiati et al. (2023) similarly found that interactive communicative tasks and a supportive classroom atmosphere were the most impactful approaches among Indonesian and Malaysian secondary English teachers. Gao et al. (2024) further confirmed through a systematic review that structured communicative tasks and emotionally supportive relationships consistently produced the highest gains in students' willingness to communicate.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design. A qualitative approach was selected because this study aimed to explore and describe the strategies used by language mentors in their natural context, emphasizing meaning, experience, and process (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

This study was conducted at MTsN 1 Kebumen, an Islamic boarding school in Kebumen Regency, Central Java, Indonesia. The participants were six language mentors and twelve students actively involved in the language mentoring program, selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in English speaking activities. Data were collected through: (1) non-participant observations across twelve sessions over two weeks, (2) semi-structured interviews with all six language mentors, recorded and transcribed verbatim, and (3) documentation including program schedules, session plans, and activity records. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase framework — familiarization, generating codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report — with triangulation across all three data sources and member checking applied to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on observation, interview, and documentation data, this study identified three major categories of strategies employed by language mentors at MTsN 1 Kebumen: (1) daily immersive speaking strategies, (2) structured communicative activities, and (3) motivational and affective strategies. Each category is elaborated below.

1. Daily Immersive Speaking Strategies

Language mentors consistently enforced English-only conversations during daily interactions, including during meals, dormitory time, and informal gatherings. This practice, referred to by mentors as “English environment enforcement,” was confirmed through observation notes from twelve sessions across two weeks. Mentor 1 stated during interview:

> "We always remind students to use English even when they ask for simple things like passing water or asking what time it is. It builds the habit without pressure."

This approach aligns with Wijaya (2023), who argued that creating a low-anxiety, naturalistic speaking environment is foundational to reducing affective barriers and encouraging students to use English spontaneously. The immersive English environment at MTsN 1 Kebumen also supports Gao et al. (2024), who found that consistent exposure to English in low-stakes settings significantly increased students' WTC. This daily immersion practice further reflects principles of communicative language teaching, which prioritizes authentic, meaningful language use over decontextualized drill exercises (Widiati et al., 2023).

2. Structured Communicative Activities

During scheduled mentoring sessions held three times per week, language mentors facilitated structured speaking activities including role play, storytelling, group discussion, and vocabulary games. Based on observation field notes from twelve sessions, group discussion was the most consistently implemented activity, observed in 10 of 12 sessions (83%), followed by vocabulary games (9 sessions, 75%), role play (8 sessions, 67%), and storytelling (6 sessions, 50%).

Activity Type	Frequency (per week)	Duration (minutes)	Observed Sessions
Role Play	2	20–30	8 out of 12
Storytelling	1	15–20	7 out of 12
Group Discussion	2	25–35	10 out of 12
Vocabulary Games	1	10–15	9 out of 12
English Debate	1	30–45	5 out of 12

The high frequency of group discussion reflects the collaborative spirit of the Islamic boarding school environment at MTsN 1 Kebumen, where peer interaction is a natural part of daily life. These findings are consistent with Widiati et al. (2023), who found interactive communicative tasks to be among the most effective approaches for improving EFL speaking. Mentors reported that peer-based activities reduced individual performance pressure and made students more willing to attempt spoken English.

3. Motivational and Affective Strategies

Beyond activity design, language mentors placed considerable emphasis on affective strategies including positive reinforcement, constructive feedback, and relationship-building. All six mentors interviewed reported using verbal praise and encouragement as their primary motivational tool. Five of six mentors (83%) considered verbal praise and encouragement as their most effective strategy. Peer encouragement activities and storytelling from personal experience were each identified as highly effective by four mentors (67%).

Strategy	Very Effective	Effective	Less Effective
Verbal praise and encouragement	5 (83%)	1 (17%)	0 (0%)
Constructive error correction	3 (50%)	2 (33%)	1 (17%)
Peer encouragement activities	4 (67%)	2 (33%)	0 (0%)
Reward/recognition systems	2 (33%)	3 (50%)	1 (17%)
Storytelling from personal exper.	4 (67%)	1 (17%)	1 (17%)

These findings are consistent with Auliyah and Sujannah (2023), who identified positive mentor-student relationships and a supportive environment as the most significant contributors to WTC in Indonesian EFL contexts. Mentors also noted that recognizing students' individual progress — rather than comparing students to peers — was essential in sustaining motivation and building a sense of communicative competence over time.

Constructive error correction was generally applied through indirect techniques such as recasting — repeating the student's utterance in correct form — and elicitation, which prompts self-correction. Mentors explained that direct, public correction often heightened students' anxiety,

consistent with Abrar et al. (2022), who noted that overt correction is counterproductive if not delivered sensitively, particularly in peer-witnessed contexts. Indirect feedback maintained communicative momentum while still drawing attention to linguistic form.

Challenges Faced by Language Mentors

Despite the range of strategies employed, language mentors identified several recurring challenges. The most frequently cited challenge was students' reluctance to speak in front of peers due to fear of embarrassment and ridicule (reported by all six mentors). Limited vocabulary was the second most common obstacle, followed by difficulty sustaining student motivation over extended mentoring periods. These challenges mirror findings by Abrar et al. (2022) and Putri and Amri (2022), who similarly identified anxiety, vocabulary limitations, and motivation as persistent barriers in Indonesian EFL speaking contexts.

Mentors responded to these challenges through graduated speaking tasks — beginning with pair work before progressing to group and whole-class speaking activities. This scaffolded approach reduced individual performance anxiety and gradually increased students' exposure to more demanding speaking contexts. Mentors also created a judgment-free atmosphere where errors were normalized as part of the learning process, consistent with communicative language teaching principles (Widiati et al., 2023) and Wijaya's (2023) finding that enjoyable, low-pressure learning circumstances are essential for reducing speaking anxiety among EFL learners.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the strategies used by language mentors at MTsN 1 Kebumen to encourage students to speak English. The study identified three main categories of strategies: (1) daily immersive English conversations enforced through English-only interaction policies, (2) structured communicative activities conducted during scheduled mentoring sessions, and (3) motivational and affective strategies including positive reinforcement, indirect corrective feedback, and relationship-building. These strategies were found to positively influence students' confidence and willingness to communicate in English, consistent with Gao et al.'s (2024) WTC framework and Wijaya's (2023) principles of low-anxiety speaking practice.

Challenges including peer embarrassment, limited vocabulary, and inconsistent motivation were identified as persistent barriers that language mentors addressed through graduated speaking tasks and a supportive, judgment-free environment. Theoretically, this study contributes to the WTC literature by demonstrating that informal, mentor-led Islamic boarding school environments can serve as effective incubators of communicative confidence among junior high EFL learners. Practically, the findings offer actionable insights for language mentors and program administrators in Islamic boarding school settings across Indonesia. Future research could investigate the long-term effects of these strategies on speaking proficiency using quantitative or mixed-methods approaches, and could extend findings to other Islamic boarding school institutions to test generalizability.

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