

Optimizing the Pesantren Environment to Enhance Speaking Skills: A Case Study

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A B S T R A C T

This study explores how the learning environment at Nurul Jadid Islamic Boarding School can be better leveraged to help students improve their English speaking skills. Through a qualitative case study, the researcher gathered insights from five eighth-semester English Education students using interviews, observations, and document analysis. The findings reveal that structured language programs, peer collaboration, supportive teacher role models, and the use of English in religious activities all play a meaningful role in expanding students' vocabulary, boosting their confidence, and sharpening their grammar awareness. Despite these positive factors, several challenges remain such as inconsistent enforcement of language rules, limited interaction with fluent or native speakers, and students' anxiety about making mistakes when speaking. To make the most of the professional environment, the study highlights the need for stronger institutional backing, more engaged teachers, and increased opportunities for authentic speaking practice. Overall, the research shows that Islamic boarding schools hold strong potential as effective spaces for language development, especially within religious education contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

Pesantren, as traditional Islamic boarding schools, hold a distinctive place in Indonesia's educational landscape. These institutions are not only centers for religious instruction but also play a pivotal role in shaping the moral, intellectual, and social competencies of their students. The integration of religious, educational, and cultural values within pesantren creates a holistic environment that supports character development and academic achievement (Nata, 2021). Among the various skills cultivated in this setting, speaking skills particularly in a foreign language such as English are increasingly recognized as vital for students preparing to enter globalized academic and professional arenas. At Pesantren Nurul Jadid Paiton, the unique blend of formal and informal learning opportunities provides an ideal context for investigating how the pesantren environment can be optimized to enhance the speaking abilities of students, especially those majoring in English Education.

Despite the inherent potential of pesantren as immersive language-learning environments, several challenges impede the optimal development of speaking skills. Traditional teaching methodologies, limited exposure to authentic language use, and varying levels of student motivation often restrict opportunities for meaningful communication in English (Handayani, 2019). Moreover, the dormitory system, while fostering close-knit communities, may inadvertently reinforce the use of local languages over English in daily interactions. These factors highlight the need for more interactive, learner-centered approaches that encourage active language use and build students' confidence. Integrating communicative tasks such as debates, role-plays, and group discussions, alongside the

establishment of English-speaking zones, can significantly enhance students' speaking proficiency and reduce their anxiety about making mistakes (Tuan & Mai, 2015).

The focus of this study on eighth-semester female students in the English Education program at Pesantren Nurul Jadid Paiton is particularly significant. As these students approach the culmination of their undergraduate studies, they are expected to demonstrate advanced speaking skills necessary for academic success and future careers in education, translation, and other language-intensive fields. Female students in pesantren settings may also encounter unique challenges and opportunities, including gender-based expectations, access to learning resources, and cultural norms that shape their educational experiences. By centering on their perspectives, this research seeks to uncover the nuanced ways in which the pesantren environment influences language skill development and to identify strategies that address their specific needs and aspirations.

Optimizing speaking skills in a pesantren context involves a multifaceted approach. Pedagogical strategies must be adapted to harmonize language learning with religious and cultural values, creating an environment where students feel supported and motivated (Hidayati et al., 2024). The physical and social infrastructure should facilitate regular English communication, through initiatives such as English clubs, language corners, and immersion programs (Abrar et al., 2018). The role of teachers and mentors is equally crucial; their guidance and encouragement can foster a supportive atmosphere that promotes risk-taking and language experimentation. Additionally, the integration of technology such as language learning applications, online forums, and virtual exchanges can expand students' exposure to authentic English use and provide opportunities for practice beyond the confines of the pesantren (Sardi et al., 2015).

This study aims to fill a critical gap in the literature by systematically examining the strategies, challenges, and outcomes related to the development of speaking skills among English Education students at Pesantren Nurul Jadid Paiton. By analyzing the interplay between institutional practices, student motivation, and the broader pesantren environment, the research seeks to generate insights that can inform best practices for language instruction in similar educational settings. The findings are expected to have significant implications for educators, policymakers, and researchers, offering evidence-based recommendations for optimizing language learning in pesantren. Ultimately, by leveraging the unique strengths of pesantren and addressing existing barriers, these institutions can become centers of linguistic excellence, empowering students especially female learners to achieve their full communicative potential and contribute meaningfully to society.

METHOD

Research Design

In this study, a qualitative research design employing a case study method was utilized to gain an in-depth understanding of how the environment at Pesantren Nurul Jadid can be optimized to enhance students' speaking skills. This approach, as outlined by (Creswell, 2012), is particularly well-suited for exploring central issues and developing a nuanced understanding of individuals' experiences within a specific social context. Drawing on the perspectives of (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), the qualitative case study method enables the researcher to investigate participants' perceptions, motivations, and social interactions within the unique setting of a pesantren. By focusing on the lived experiences of school managers, teachers, and students, the study aims to capture the complexities and dynamics involved in the development of speaking skills. The case study framework, as described by (Robert K. Yin, 2018), allows for a comprehensive exploration of the "how" and "why" of language skill development in a real-world context, taking into account the social and cultural factors that shape the learning process at Pesantren Nurul Jadid.

Respondents

The respondents in this study comprised key stakeholders directly involved in the process of optimizing the pesantren environment to enhance students' speaking skills at

Pesantren Nurul Jadid. These included eighth-semester female students of the English Education program, who are the primary beneficiaries of the speaking skill development initiatives, as well as teachers, supervisors, and school managers who play vital roles in shaping the physical, social, and cultural learning environment. Drawing on Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977), which highlights the significance of observation, imitation, and modeling within social contexts, the study focused on how these respondents interact and influence one another in the learning process. By examining their experiences, behaviors, and perceptions, the research aimed to identify both supportive and inhibiting factors in speaking skill acquisition, thereby providing comprehensive insights into how the pesantren environment can be optimized to foster effective communication skills that prepare students for academic and professional challenges.

Instruments

In this study, the primary research instrument was the researcher themselves, consistent with qualitative research principles as emphasized by Creswell (2012) and Sugiyono (2016), where the researcher plays a central role in data collection and interpretation. Acting as the main instrument, the researcher engaged directly with participants through observations of the pesantren environment, in-depth interviews, and meticulous field note-taking to capture rich, contextualized data on how the Pesantren Nurul Jadid environment influences the development of students' speaking skills. To enhance the credibility and systematic documentation of the study, additional supporting instruments were employed, including interview guides, observation checklists, and audio-video recordings of speaking activities. These tools facilitated a comprehensive and detailed recording of both the language practices and environmental factors critical to understanding the optimization of speaking skills within the pesantren setting.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study was conducted using a descriptive approach, which aims to systematically describe and present the data collected without engaging in hypothesis testing. As Creswell (2014) explains, descriptive analysis is particularly suitable for providing a clear and detailed understanding of the phenomena under investigation by highlighting characteristics and emerging patterns from both qualitative and quantitative data. This approach allowed the researcher to capture the complexities of how the pesantren environment influences the development of students' speaking skills by focusing on rich, contextualized descriptions rather than statistical inference.

Following the framework proposed by (Miles et al., 2014; in Sugiyono, 2007, p.204), the data analysis process involved three key stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction involved selecting, focusing, and simplifying the raw data to distill meaningful information relevant to the research objectives, making it easier to interpret. Subsequently, data presentation was carried out primarily through narrative forms, organizing the information systematically to facilitate understanding of the various factors affecting speaking skill development in Pesantren Nurul Jadid. Finally, conclusions were drawn by synthesizing the reduced and presented data, always referring back to the research questions, to provide informed solutions and insights into optimizing the pesantren environment for improved speaking proficiency.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Language Environment at Pesantren Nurul Jadid

Pesantren Nurul Jadid has established itself as a modern Islamic boarding school that integrates religious and general education, with a strong emphasis on language development. The structured language environment is evident through designated English-speaking zones, scheduled English activities, and regular speaking contests. These initiatives are designed to immerse students in English communication. However, the effectiveness of these programs varies, as not all students consistently engage in English-speaking practices, highlighting a gap between policy and actual implementation.

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Interviews with student participants reveal a high level of motivation to learn and use English, driven by aspirations for higher education and better career prospects. Students recognize the importance of English proficiency for future opportunities, such as studying abroad or working in international settings. Despite this motivation, psychological barriers – such as fear of making mistakes and low self-confidence – often hinder active participation in English-speaking activities. These findings underscore the need for supportive interventions to address language anxiety and build student confidence.

Strategies to Promote Speaking Skills

The pesantren employs several strategies to enhance students' speaking abilities. The Language Development Department organizes structured programs, including the Foreign Language Development Program (PPBA), weekly English meetings, and a system of rewards and punishments to encourage English use. Peer support is another key strategy, with students forming small groups or "English circles" to practice speaking in a less intimidating environment. Teacher involvement also plays a crucial role; teachers who consistently use English serve as role models and motivators. However, inconsistency among teachers in using English limits the overall effectiveness of these strategies.

Challenges in Optimizing the Language Environment

Despite the presence of structured programs, several challenges persist. Psychological barriers, such as fear of public speaking and embarrassment over mistakes, reduce students' willingness to practice. Inconsistent enforcement of English-speaking rules allows students to revert to their native languages when unsupervised. Additionally, limited exposure to native or fluent English speakers restricts students' ability to develop authentic conversational skills and listening comprehension. These challenges highlight the need for more consistent policy enforcement and increased opportunities for real-life English interaction.

Indicators of Progress and Integration with Religious Activities

Students report noticeable improvements in vocabulary, confidence, and grammar awareness, particularly in informal settings. Regular feedback from peers and mentors contributes to better pronunciation and grammatical accuracy. A unique aspect of the pesantren's approach is the integration of English into religious activities, such as translating sermons and religious texts. This bilingual practice not only enhances language skills but also deepens students' religious understanding, fostering both linguistic and cognitive development.

Institutional Support and Implications for Future Practice

Institutional commitment is evident through clear language policies and curricular integration. However, the gap between policy and practice remains a significant issue. Secondary data and previous research support the finding that consistent mentoring, clear policies, and authentic language use are critical for successful language acquisition in pesantren environments. To optimize outcomes, it is recommended that Pesantren Nurul Jadid strengthen policy enforcement, empower teachers as consistent role models, and create more engaging, real-life speaking opportunities. These steps will help bridge the gap between policy and practice, supporting holistic and sustainable language development for students.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the language environment at Pesantren Nurul Jadid plays a significant and multifaceted role in enhancing students' English-speaking skills. The structured implementation of English areas, weekly speaking meetings, and peer support systems provides students with valuable opportunities to practice and develop their oral proficiency in a relatively supportive and immersive setting. However, the overall effectiveness of these initiatives is tempered by challenges such as inconsistent enforcement of language policies, psychological barriers like fear of making mistakes, and limited exposure to fluent or native English speakers. While students demonstrate strong intrinsic motivation driven by aspirations for international education and career, the full potential of the English-speaking environment is not yet realized, largely due to gaps in

teacher role modeling and authentic communicative experiences. Notably, innovative approaches such as peer learning groups, speech competitions, and the integration of English into religious activities have yielded positive outcomes, notably in students' vocabulary acquisition, confidence, and grammatical awareness, while also fostering a deeper understanding of religious content through bilingual engagement. These findings highlight the importance of a holistic and contextually relevant approach to language learning, where both institutional support and creative pedagogical strategies are essential. To maximize the impact of the pesantren's language environment, it is recommended that efforts be intensified to ensure consistent policy implementation, strengthen teacher training and involvement, and expand access to authentic English resources and communicative opportunities. With sustained commitment and strategic refinement, Pesantren Nurul Jadid has the potential to serve as a model for developing English-speaking proficiency among Indonesia's future generation of Islamic scholars, blending linguistic competence with religious and cultural values.

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