

# Language Learning Strategies for Speaking Proficiency: A Case Study in an Islamic Religious School

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the language learning strategies (LLS) employed by Islamic Religious students to improve their English-speaking skills. While Islamic Religious schools in Malaysia traditionally emphasise Quranic memorisation and religious studies, limited attention is given to communicative English, particularly speaking. The aim of this study was to identify the language learning strategies commonly used by Islamic Religious students to enhance their English-speaking ability. By doing so, the research provides insights into the strategies of the learners in religious educational settings in order to excel in speaking. A quantitative research design was employed using a structured questionnaire adapted from Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), with a focus on strategies relevant to speaking. Thirty lower-secondary students from an Islamic Religious school in Perak, Malaysia, were selected through purposive sampling. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics to identify patterns in the students' strategy use. The findings revealed that the most frequently used strategies were metacognitive, social, and cognitive, while memory strategies were the least preferred. Future research should explore integrated strategy training, especially the combination of metacognitive and memory techniques, as well as the role of culturally aligned teacher training in enhancing students' speaking proficiency within Islamic education settings.

**Keywords:** Language Learning Strategy, Speaking Skills, Secondary School, Islamic Religious School Students, English Language

## INTRODUCTION

Research on Language Learning Strategies (LLS) has long focused on how learners develop effective approaches to acquiring second languages. While numerous studies have been conducted in mainstream and urban educational settings, there has been considerably less attention on how learners in religious-based institutions, particularly Islamic Religious Schools, develop their English language skills, especially speaking. Students studying at boarding Islamic schools face unique challenges in acquiring English language skills due to the specific context and environment in which they learn, including limited exposure to English outside the classroom, a curriculum focused more on religious studies, and a lack of English-speaking practice opportunities (Sofyan et al., 2023).

Islamic Religious Schools are widely recognised for their role in producing Huffaz, individuals who have committed the Holy Qur'an to memory. Consequently, the primary aim of these institutions is to equip students with the necessary skills to read, memorise, and understand the Quranic text (Abdullah et al., 2022). The curriculum in these schools is heavily focused on Arabic and religious studies, with English language instruction receiving relatively minimal attention. Arabic is considered a fundamental *episteme* in Islamic boarding schools, forming the basis of their scientific and religious education (Tabroni et al., 2022). In these schools, the curriculum primarily focuses on religious education, leaving limited time and resources for English instruction,

which hampers students' progress and proficiency (Sofyan et al., 2023). As a result, students in these settings often have limited exposure to communicative English and few opportunities to practise speaking in authentic contexts.

In recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in the emphasis on Quranic memorisation, driven by growing parental aspirations for their children to become *Huffaz* and the rising visibility of *dakwah*-related programmes in mainstream media (Abdullah et al., 2022). At the same time, globalisation has made English proficiency increasingly important, even in religious education settings. According to Statista (2025), around 1.53 billion people worldwide spoke English either as a first or second language in 2025. This global prevalence highlights the value of equipping students with strong communication skills in English. For Islamic Religious school students, being able to speak English fluently not only supports future academic opportunities but also enhances their ability to engage with broader communities and participate in interfaith dialogues. Mastery of English is essential for accessing and sharing knowledge across global networks, contributing to personal and professional growth (Mamaliga, 2023). While the formal curriculum in religious school settings places limited emphasis on English, some students exhibit the ability to communicate effectively in English, hinting at the possible use of self-initiated language learning strategies.

This study is significant as it examines a unique educational context where English often takes a secondary role to religious instruction, yet students face growing demands to develop communicative English skills (Sofyan et al., 2023). By investigating the language learning strategies employed by Islamic Religious students to enhance their speaking skills in a predominantly non-communicative environment, this research aims to inform teachers, curriculum developers, and administrators about how best to support learners' linguistic needs. Additionally, it may increase students' awareness of their own strategies, encouraging more autonomous and effective language learning. Furthermore, the study serves as a foundation for future research on LLS in religious education, highlighting potential gaps and opportunities for curriculum improvement and strategy training.

This shift in focus towards learners' needs, as noted by Alrashidi (2022), reflects a broader trend in education over the past three decades, where there has been a gradual yet significant move from teacher-centred to learner-centred approaches. In this context, it becomes essential to understand how Islamic Religious school students approach language learning, particularly in developing their speaking skills, and what strategies they employ to improve their English proficiency.

Given this unique educational context, this study aims to explore the language learning strategies employed by Islamic Religious school students to enhance their English-speaking skills. By identifying these strategies, the study seeks to provide insights into how speaking proficiency can be nurtured and supported in similar educational settings, despite the curriculum's limited focus on communicative language practice.

## Research Objective

To identify the language learning strategies used by Islamic Religious school students to improve their English-speaking skills

## Research Question

Which language learning strategies are commonly used by Islamic Religious school students to enhance their English-speaking ability?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Speaking Skills in Second Language Learning

Speaking is a critical yet challenging aspect of second language acquisition, requiring the integration of cognitive, linguistic, and social skills in real-time (Agustin et al., 2021). Learners often struggle with psychological barriers such as anxiety and low self-efficacy, which hinder their willingness to engage in speaking tasks (Ghafar & Raheem, 2023). Language anxiety, as highlighted by Hameed and Jawad (2024), significantly impedes oral performance, often leading to avoidance and disengagement. To counter this, educators play a

pivotal role in reducing anxiety by cultivating a supportive environment and offering engaging speaking activities (Daymiel et al., 2022; Mahmoud et al., 2024).

### **Language Learning Strategies (LLS) for Speaking**

Language Learning Strategies (LLS) are essential tools for enhancing speaking proficiency among ESL learners. Among these, metacognitive strategies including planning, monitoring, and evaluating learning are most commonly used and effective, especially for fostering learner autonomy (Choong & Tan, 2023). Social strategies, involving interaction with peers and native speakers, are especially popular among Generation Alpha learners (Khizrani et al., 2023), while memory strategies help learners retain and retrieve vocabulary, though they are less preferred at the primary level. Preferences vary by age group: primary students tend to favour memory strategies, while secondary students utilize a broader range, with metacognitive strategies being prominent (Chandran et al., 2023; Peter et al., 2023). To maximise impact, teachers should integrate learners' preferred strategies into their instruction, enhancing both motivation and effectiveness (Pasang & Hashim, 2023).

### **Language Learning in Islamic Religious School Contexts**

Language learning in Islamic religious schools uniquely blends traditional Islamic values with modern pedagogical practices. While students excel in memorisation and recitation, particularly of Quranic texts, they often lack exposure to communicative English, which hampers speaking development (Subhan et al., 2024; Fitria, 2023). Challenges such as first language interference, poor pronunciation, and limited vocabulary further restrict their oral proficiency (Sofyan et al., 2023). Given the strong link between English proficiency and employability (Prasetya, 2023), integrated teaching strategies are vital. Techniques that combine listening, reading, and writing with speaking such as verbal summarization or group discussions can promote deeper engagement and practical language use (Usman & Mahmud, 2024). Moreover, effective instruction in this context requires balancing cultural-religious traditions with innovative methods to maintain relevance while respecting Islamic values (Ahmadi & Saad, 2024). Teachers who recognise learners' personality traits, confidence levels, and learning preferences can better support speaking development and reduce anxiety.

Despite growing interest in LLS for speaking, research remains limited in Islamic education contexts. Most studies focus on mainstream settings with fewer cultural constraints and greater communicative opportunities (Vimalakshan & Aziz, 2021; Lian et al., 2021). This underscores a clear research gap in exploring context-appropriate, culturally sensitive LLS that address the unique challenges and needs of learners in Islamic Religious schools.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research design**

This study employed a quantitative research design which utilized a survey-based approach to investigate the language learning strategies (LLS) employed by the Islamic Religious school students to enhance their English-speaking skills. A structured questionnaire was adapted to serve as the primary instrument for the data collection process to enable the researchers in obtaining quantifiable data on students' preferred strategies and the frequency of their use. A quantitative design was selected to allow for objective measurement and pattern identification in the use of language strategies, particularly those related to speaking (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This approach was deemed suitable to identify patterns and trends in strategy usage especially when they relate to the development of speaking proficiency. The survey was organized around six major categories of strategies as outlined in Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL): memory, cognitive, metacognitive, compensation, affective, and social strategies (Oxford, 1990). SILL provides detailed insights into the types of strategies learners use, which can be crucial for tailoring educational approaches.

### **Population**

The respondents for this study consisted of secondary Islamic Religious school students in Malaysia, aged 13 and 18. Given the limited student population in this type of religious school, the researcher included students

across different age groups in the study. These students are enrolled in Islamic Religious school which focuses mainly on the Quranic memorisation with formal academic subjects, including English as a second language under the national curriculum. Their dual educational focus potentially influences their strategy to language learning particularly in acquiring productive skills such as speaking as they need to learn Arabic as well as English in addition to their mother tongue, Bahasa Malaysia.

## Sample

Due to practical limitations in accessing the entire population, the study employed a purposive sampling technique to identify a representative subgroup. Purposive sampling involves the deliberate selection of participants based on specific characteristics aligned with the research objectives (Andrade, 2021). As Maxwell (2013) notes, purposive sampling allows researchers to select individuals who are most likely to yield rich, relevant, and diverse data pertinent to the research questions. It is particularly suitable when the study involves a subgroup with unique educational experiences not uniformly distributed across the general population. In this study, a total of 30 students were purposely selected from a Islamic Religious school located in Perak. These students were chosen based on specific inclusion criteria which are their enrollment in an Islamic Religious school that adheres to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) aligned English curriculum. Another criteria is they need to take the English subject and possess a low to intermediate level of English proficiency. These criteria ensured that the participants had adequate exposure to formal English instruction and were sufficiently equipped to engage with, apply, and reflect on language learning strategies relevant to speaking skill development. Their shared educational characteristics made them well-suited to the study's aims of exploring the use of speaking-focused language learning strategies (LLS) in the Islamic Religious educational context.

On top of that, permission was obtained from the school principal to collect the data from the students. The principal acknowledged and welcomed the researchers to conduct the survey to identify their strategy in learning English. Informed consent was also obtained from the students through distributed consent forms, which clearly explained the nature of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the assurance of confidentiality. Students were also given the opportunity to provide assent by signing a simplified agreement form, confirming their willingness to participate. The participants were informed that their identities would remain anonymous, and the data collected through the survey would be used solely for research purposes. No names or identifying details would appear in the final report as explained by the researcher.

## Instrument

The primary data collection instrument was a modified version of Oxford's (1990) SILL questionnaire, specifically adapted to emphasise strategies related to speaking skills. The revised survey consisted of two sections. Section A collected demographic information such as age, gender, and English proficiency level while Section B consisted of 30 items, with five questions representing each of the six Language Learning Strategy (LLS) categories. The six LLS categories included Memory strategies, Cognitive strategies, Compensation strategies, Metacognitive strategies, Affective strategies and Social strategies. Responses in Section B were rated using a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 4 = *Strongly Agree*). This scale was utilised to determine the respondents' degree of agreement with each strategy statement, thereby providing insight into the frequency and consistency of their strategy use when engaging in speaking tasks. The results helped identify which strategies were most and least commonly employed among learners with varying levels of speaking proficiency. Moreover, the items were structured using clear and simple sentences to accommodate diverse respondent abilities with the majority of them leaning towards a moderate proficiency level of English language.

## Data collection procedure

To address the research objective, quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire adapted from Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), with a focus on learning strategies relevant to speaking skills. The questionnaire was administered in printed form during regular English lessons at the selected Islamic Religious school. Distribution and supervision of the survey were facilitated by the English language teacher, who provided standardised instructions to ensure clarity and encourage independent

completion by all participants. This approach minimized the potential for response bias and maintained the integrity of the data.

### Data analysis

The collected data were systematically analysed using descriptive statistics, employing the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Responses to each questionnaire item were grouped according to the six established strategy categories: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. The use of frequency counts enabled the researcher to determine the relative prevalence of each strategy type among participants. The structured design of the questionnaire allowed for efficient categorisation and comparison across strategy types. This statistical analysis facilitated the identification of the most and least commonly employed strategies, thereby offering insights into these Islamic Religious school students' preferred approaches for improving their speaking abilities in an English as a Second Language (ESL) context.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

**Table 1. Age Category of Respondents**

No.	Age Category	Frequency
1	15 and below	8
2	Above 15	22

As shown in Table 1, the majority of respondents, which is 22 respondents, were above 15 years old, while only 8 respondents were aged 15 and below. This suggests that most of the participants are in the upper secondary level of education, which may impact their choice of language learning strategies. Older learners tend to exhibit greater autonomy in strategy selection. This aligns with the students' preference of language learning strategy for metacognitive and social strategies.

**Table 2. English Proficiency Level**

No.	English Proficiency Level	Frequency
1	Low	9
2	Moderate	20
3	High	1

Next, table 2 shows that the majority of students, 20 out of 30 reported low English proficiency, while 3 students had moderate proficiency and only 1 had high proficiency. This corroborates that many students in this particular Islamic Religious school may find English-speaking particularly challenging. It is possibly due to limited exposure and curricular priorities (Fitria, 2023; Sofyan et al., 2023). This finding is important, as it influences the type of strategies they are likely to use to improve their speaking ability.

**Table. 3 Language Learning Strategies Used to Improve Speaking Skills**

No.	Strategy	Mean/ $\bar{x}$	S.D/ $\sigma$
1	Memory Strategy	3.0067	0.38050
2	Cognitive Strategy	3.2400	0.49182
3	Compensation Strategy	3.0867	0.49182
4	Metacognitive Strategy	3.3133	0.41584



5	Affective Strategy	3.1800	0.43423
6	Social Strategy	3.2533	0.41666

Furthermore, table 3 presents the mean scores for the six language learning strategies based on Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). The analysis reveals that the most frequently employed strategies were Metacognitive Strategies ( $M = 3.3133$ ,  $SD = 0.41584$ ), followed by Social Strategies ( $M = 3.2533$ ,  $SD = 0.41666$ ) and Cognitive Strategies ( $M = 3.2400$ ,  $SD = 0.49182$ ).

These results show that Islamic Religious school students predominantly use metacognitive strategies, such as planning their speaking practice, setting goals, and monitoring their performance. The frequent use of social strategies suggests that students often practice speaking through interaction by asking for help, participating in group activities, or speaking with peers. Cognitive strategies, such as repeating phrases, mentally translating, and practicing sounds, were also commonly used, indicating active engagement in language learning (Oxford, 1990).

These findings are consistent with previous research showing that metacognitive strategies like goal-setting and self-monitoring are essential for self-regulated learning (Choong & Tan, 2023). Moreover, the students' preference for social strategies may be linked to their relatively low English proficiency levels. Interacting with peers can help reduce anxiety and provide real-life opportunities to practice speaking (Hameed & Jawad, 2024; Mahmoud et al., 2024). Similarly, the frequent use of cognitive strategies such as mental translation suggests that learners are actively engaging with the language in meaningful ways to support communication. Through mental translation, learners compare and contrast their native language with the target language, forming a cognitive framework or translational field that retains procedural knowledge for future application (Toma & Dejica, 2023). This mental process involves not only the perception and acquisition of language but also the ability to produce dialogue, all of which are fundamental to effective communicative language learning (Toma, 2024).

However, the least used strategies were memory-based ones ( $Mean = 3.0067$ ,  $SD = 0.38050$ ), which involve techniques like repetition and association to remember vocabulary or sentence structures. This low preference suggests that students may not view memorisation as a helpful method for speaking practice. Since speaking requires quick thinking and real-time language use, they may find memory strategies less relevant. This is somewhat surprising, given their strong background in memorisation from religious studies (Subhan et al., 2024). The disconnect may indicate that students have yet to apply their memorisation strengths effectively especially when speaking English as they can't remember the words.

These findings support Oxford's (1990) view that successful language learners often combine metacognitive and social strategies. However, they contrast with patterns observed in mainstream ESL settings, where memory strategies tend to be more commonly used (Khizrani et al., 2023). One possible explanation is the unique focus of Islamic education, which emphasises recitation and memorisation over communicative use of language. This highlights the importance of context-sensitive strategy instruction (Ahmadi & Saad, 2024).

Overall, the preference for metacognitive and social strategies reflects the students' awareness of the need to plan their learning and interact with others to improve their speaking skills. This suggests that, despite limited formal exposure to spoken English, these students are taking an active role in managing their learning processes. Their reliance on peer interaction and self-regulation also indicates a willingness to seek out opportunities for practice and feedback. Therefore, incorporating these preferred strategies into classroom instruction could enhance engagement and support more effective speaking development in religious school contexts.

## IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study offer several implications for English language teaching, particularly for Islamic Religious school students who struggle with speaking skills. These implications focus on the integration of strategy-based instruction (SBI), memory strategies, supportive learning environments, and alignment with cultural-religious values to assist learners in identifying and applying effective speaking strategies.

## Strategy-Based Instruction

The dominance of metacognitive and social strategies among students indicates a growing awareness of learning autonomy and a willingness to engage collaboratively to enhance speaking skills. This suggests the importance of explicitly teaching planning, self-monitoring, and interaction-focused tasks within a strategy-based instructional framework. Teachers should guide students in setting personal goals for speaking activities, encourage peer feedback to promote reflection, and use self-assessment tools such as reflection journals or recorded speaking tasks to build self-awareness. These practices align with Chamot and O'Malley's (1994) Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA), which emphasizes the development of metacognitive awareness as a means to support learners with lower language proficiency. By combining these strategies, teachers can create a learning environment that empowers students to take charge of their learning, leading to increased motivation and engagement (Anca, 2022).

Moreover, the frequent use of social strategies like peer interaction underscores the value of collaboration in language development. Structured activities such as role-plays and group discussions on culturally relevant topics provide students with meaningful contexts to apply speaking strategies, while think-pair-share techniques help reduce anxiety and encourage participation (Daymiel et al., 2022; Usman & Mahmud, 2024). These methods are supported by Vygotsky's (1978) social learning theory, which highlights how social interaction acts as a scaffold for language acquisition. Thus, incorporating both metacognitive and social strategies within SBI fosters self-regulation, peer collaboration, and confidence in speaking.

## Memory Strategy Integration

The relatively low use of memory strategies among students suggested limited awareness of how these techniques can support vocabulary retention, which is actually essential for fluent speaking. Teachers and curriculum developers should raise awareness through explicit instruction and guided practice in memory strategies. One effective approach is to leverage students' existing strengths in Quranic memorisation by connecting familiar techniques with English vocabulary learning. Methods such as chunking and visual association can be introduced to help students encode and retrieve language more efficiently (Khizrani et al., 2023). By integrating these familiar memory processes into English learning, students may develop more effective ways to retain and use vocabulary during speaking tasks (Subhan et al., 2024).

## Supportive Learning Environments

To address the issues of low proficiency and speaking anxiety, it is crucial to create supportive classroom environments that foster gradual confidence building (Ghafar & Raheem, 2023). Teachers should implement low-stakes speaking activities that allow students to practice without fear of judgment, and use integrated language tasks that combine listening, reading, and speaking. These activities not only reduce pressure but also allow learners to internalise vocabulary and structures before applying them in speaking. Supportive practices like those also help create a safe, inclusive environment where students feel encouraged to communicate more freely (Daymiel et al., 2022; Usman & Mahmud, 2024).

## Cultural-Religious Alignment in Pedagogy

Language instruction in Islamic Religious schools must also consider cultural and religious values to ensure student engagement and contextual appropriateness. Pedagogical innovations should align with learners' backgrounds by incorporating familiar content such as religious texts into speaking activities. For example, using Islamic teachings or stories as prompts can facilitate meaningful discussion while respecting students' beliefs. This culturally responsive approach not only maintains student interest but also supports the development of communicative competence in a context that honours their identity and values (Ahmadi & Saad, 2024).

In short, these implications are particularly important for Islamic Religious schools, where English may not be the primary focus. By integrating strategy-based instruction with attention to memory strategies, supportive learning conditions, and cultural-religious alignment, teachers can bridge the gap between students' current proficiency levels and their communicative goals. Encouraging communication, collaboration, and reflective learning strategies empowers students to gain confidence and gradually improve their speaking performance in

a meaningful and culturally respectful manner.

### Limitations of the Study

This study presents several limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the sample size was relatively small, with only 30 respondents from a single Islamic Religious school. This limited scope restricts the generalizability of the findings to a broader population of ESL learners, particularly those in different types of schools or educational settings. Secondly, the age distribution of the participants was uneven, with a majority of respondents (22 out of 30) aged above 15. This imbalance may have influenced the findings, as older learners typically demonstrate more autonomy and are more likely to employ metacognitive and social strategies compared to younger learners. Therefore, the strategy preferences identified in this study may not fully represent the behaviours of younger students in similar contexts.

Another limitation concern is the self-reported nature of the data, especially in the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) responses. Participants may have overestimated or underestimated their use of certain strategies due to social desirability bias or lack of self-awareness, which could affect the accuracy of the results. Additionally, most of the respondents reported low English proficiency, which may have influenced their understanding of the survey items and the strategies available to them. Limited proficiency might have constrained their ability to articulate their actual language learning behaviours, particularly in the use of complex or less familiar strategies like compensation or affective techniques.

Lastly, the study did not explore teachers' perspectives or classroom observations, which could have provided a more holistic understanding of how language learning strategies are used and encouraged in practice. Including teacher input and triangulating with qualitative data such as interviews or focus groups could enrich the analysis and clarify how strategy instruction aligns with students' reported preferences. These limitations highlight the need for future research involving larger, more diverse samples, mixed-method approaches, and comparative studies across different school types to gain deeper insights into strategy use in Islamic Religious school contexts.

### CONCLUSION

This study aimed to identify the language learning strategies employed by Islamic Religious school students to enhance their English-speaking skills. The findings revealed that metacognitive, social, and cognitive strategies were most frequently used, while memory strategies were the least preferred. This suggests that students are actively engaging in self-directed learning and value peer interaction in their efforts to improve spoken English. However, the generally low proficiency levels among the majority of students highlight the need for more structured support and targeted strategy instruction.

Overall, the study confirms the crucial role that language learning strategies play in the development of speaking skills. Teachers should take an active role in introducing, modeling, and reinforcing effective strategies that align with learners' specific needs, particularly within religious school contexts. The students' preference for metacognitive, social, and cognitive strategies reflects their proactive learning attitudes, yet their limited use of memory strategies points to vocabulary retention support. This gap underscores the importance of tailored interventions that build on students' strengths such as their capacity for memorisation while addressing contextual limitations like restricted English exposure (Fitria, 2023; Prasetya, 2023).

Future research should investigate the effectiveness of integrated strategy instruction, particularly approaches that combine metacognitive and memory techniques, within Islamic educational settings. Besides, studies should examine the role of teacher training in raising awareness and consistent use of learning strategies. By aligning pedagogical practices with students' religious and psychological needs, educators can turn current speaking challenges into meaningful opportunities for holistic language development (Mahmoud et al., 2024).

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