

Speaking Strategies of Low-Performing EFL Students at an Islamic Boarding School

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Abstract

This study investigated the speaking strategies employed by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students with low speaking performance and the factors that influenced their choice of strategies. A descriptive qualitative design was used, involving twelve students of MA NWDI Rensing Bat, East Lombok, in the 2025/2026 academic year, who were selected because their speaking test scores fell into the low category. Data were collected through classroom observation, a strategy questionnaire adapted from Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning, semi-structured interviews, and students' speaking scores, and were analysed using interactive qualitative analysis. The findings revealed that all six strategy categories proposed by Oxford were used at a moderate level of intensity, with cognitive and memory strategies being the most frequently applied and compensation strategies the least. The choice of strategies was influenced mainly by learners' motivation, attitudes, beliefs, gender, age, and speaking proficiency level. The study recommends that teachers explicitly train low-performing learners in cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies in order to strengthen their speaking ability.

Keywords: *speaking strategies; speaking performance; EFL students; language learning strategies; Islamic boarding school*

1. Introduction

Speaking is one of the four language skills that most clearly demonstrates a learner's command of a foreign language, and it is often regarded as the most challenging skill for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to develop. Bailey (2000) notes that speaking is a productive and interactive skill that requires learners to process language in real time, which places heavy demands on their linguistic and cognitive resources. For many EFL learners, the pressure of producing accurate and fluent speech spontaneously results in hesitation, anxiety, and, ultimately, low performance. Understanding how learners cope with these demands is therefore central to improving the teaching of speaking.

There are many strategies that learners can use to make their speaking more fluent, such as listening to English songs, watching English films, and practising with peers (Oxford, 1990). Success in learning to speak is, to a large extent, determined by the strategies that learners deploy. Junaidi, Alfian, and Atik (2015), for instance, found that Indonesian senior high school EFL learners used all major strategy categories, and that more successful learners reported a significantly higher intensity of strategy use than their less successful peers. This suggests that the way learners select and apply strategies is closely related to the quality of their speaking performance, and that strategy use is a productive lens through which to examine why some learners succeed while others struggle.

Language learning strategies are specific actions, behaviours, steps, or techniques that learners use, often consciously, to improve their progress in comprehending, internalising, and using the target language (Oxford, 1990). In the context of speaking, such strategies help learners compensate for limited linguistic resources, manage anxiety, and sustain interaction. Brown (2007) argues that success in second or foreign language learning is due largely to a learner's own personal investment of time, effort, and attention in the form of an individualised battery of strategies. Consequently, understanding which strategies learners actually use, particularly those who struggle, can inform more targeted classroom intervention.

Although speaking strategies have been studied extensively, most research has focused on successful or high-achieving learners, while comparatively little attention has been paid to learners with low speaking performance. In many Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) in Indonesia, the curriculum emphasises religious knowledge, and learners may have limited exposure and access to productive English practice. MA NWDI Rensing Bat, East Lombok, is one such school; although it aspires to make English a means of daily communication inside and outside the classroom, a number of its students continue to perform poorly in speaking despite the considerable time they spend studying. This gap between

institutional aspiration and classroom reality makes the school a relevant setting for examining how low-performing learners cope.

Investigating the strategies of low-performing learners is important because it can serve as an evaluative basis for teachers seeking to improve their students' speaking ability. Accordingly, this study aims (1) to identify the speaking strategies used by students with low speaking performance in improving their speaking ability, and (2) to examine the factors that influence their choice of strategies. Two research questions guide the study: (1) What speaking strategies are used by students with low speaking performance? and (2) What factors influence the speaking strategies used by these students?

In the Indonesian context, speaking has long been identified as the skill that EFL learners find most difficult to master, despite years of formal instruction. Learners are frequently able to read and write English at a basic level yet remain unable to express themselves orally with confidence. This imbalance has been attributed to teaching that prioritises grammar and reading comprehension over communicative practice, as well as to limited opportunities to use English outside the classroom. In boarding-school settings, where the daily routine is organised around religious study, these constraints are often magnified, and learners who begin with weaker oral skills tend to fall further behind their peers.

Focusing on low-performing learners is therefore both practically and theoretically valuable. Practically, it enables teachers to understand the coping mechanisms of the very learners who most need support; theoretically, it complements the large body of research on successful learners by illuminating the other end of the proficiency continuum. Nunan (1991) argues that classroom research should begin from the realities of the learners it seeks to serve, and it is in this spirit that the present study examines how low-performing learners in an Islamic boarding school approach the task of learning to speak.

Speaking Strategies: A Theoretical Framework

Research into language learning strategies grew out of early efforts to identify the characteristics of the 'good language learner' (Rubin, 1981; Wenden & Rubin, 1987). This line of inquiry established that effective learners actively deploy a range of strategies to manage their own learning, and it laid the foundation for later, more systematic taxonomies such as those of O'Malley and Chamot (1990) and Oxford (1990). The present study draws on Oxford's (1990) taxonomy, which remains one of the most comprehensive and widely applied frameworks in the field. Oxford divides learning strategies into two broad classes, direct and indirect strategies, each comprising three subcategories, yielding six strategy groups in total. Direct strategies (memory, cognitive, and compensation) involve the target language directly, whereas indirect strategies (metacognitive, affective, and social) support learning without directly involving the language itself (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 2003).

Oxford's (1990) framework is operationalised through the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), a self-report questionnaire that measures the frequency with which learners use each of the six strategy groups. The SILL has been widely used across diverse populations and has generally been found to be reliable, which is why it was adopted, in adapted form, in the present study. It is important to note, however, that strategy use is not valuable in itself; what matters is whether learners deploy strategies appropriately and in combination. As Ellis (1999) observes, the mere presence of strategies does not guarantee success, because effective learning depends on how well strategies are matched to tasks and coordinated with one another.

Direct Strategies in Improving Speaking Ability

Direct strategies deal with the actual, real-life use of the target language as learners practise their English. They are classified into three groups: memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies. Memory strategies are techniques that facilitate the recall of new input. They help learners store and later retrieve new information and skills whenever these are needed, for example by grouping, associating, using imagery, or reviewing in a structured way (Oxford, 1990). In speaking, memory strategies enable learners to retrieve vocabulary and expressions quickly during interaction.

Cognitive strategies are typically among the most popular strategies with language learners. They involve the manipulation and transformation of the target language, such as practising, repeating, analysing, summarising, and reasoning deductively. Strategies for practising, including naturalistic practice and formal rehearsal, are among the most important cognitive strategies for developing oral fluency (Chamot, 2004; Oxford, 1990). Compensation strategies, in turn, are behaviours that help learners overcome gaps in their knowledge of the target language so that they can continue to communicate despite limited resources. Examples include guessing intelligently from context, using synonyms or circumlocution, switching to the mother tongue, or using gestures. These strategies allow learners to keep a conversation going even when they lack the precise words (Oxford, 1990).

Indirect Strategies in Improving Speaking Ability

Indirect strategies deal with the management of learning rather than with the language itself. They are classified into metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Metacognitive strategies go beyond purely cognitive devices and provide learners with a way to coordinate their own learning process. They include planning for learning, organising, setting goals, monitoring one's performance, and evaluating progress (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Learners who plan and monitor their speaking practice are better able to identify weaknesses and regulate their improvement.

Affective strategies relate to emotions, attitudes, motivation, and values. The affective dimension is one of the strongest influences on success or failure in language learning. Techniques such as lowering anxiety through relaxation, encouraging oneself, and taking measured emotional risks help learners manage the fear and reluctance that often accompany speaking (Oxford, 1990). Social strategies, finally, involve interaction with other people during the learning

process, including peers, teachers, and native speakers. They comprise asking questions, cooperating with others, and developing cultural understanding. Because speaking is inherently interactive, social strategies are particularly relevant for developing oral competence (Oxford, 1990; Rubin, 1981).

A substantial body of research confirms that strategy use is not uniform across learners. Zare (2012) reports that strategy choice is mediated by variables such as motivation, gender, proficiency, age, and beliefs, while Ellis (1999) and Macaro (2001) stress that strategies are most effective when they are orchestrated and matched to the demands of the task. These insights frame the present analysis of why low-performing learners gravitate toward particular strategies and underuse others.

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive qualitative design (Creswell, 2007), which was considered appropriate for describing, in a natural setting, the speaking strategies used by learners and the factors underlying their choices. The design allowed the phenomenon to be portrayed in detail without manipulating any variables. The overall research procedure followed the principles of qualitative classroom research described by Nunan (1991), in which data are gathered in the learners' natural instructional setting.

The research was conducted at MA NWDI Rensing Bat, East Lombok, during the 2025/2026 academic year. The school is an Islamic boarding school whose vision includes making English a medium of daily communication, which makes it a suitable context for studying learners who struggle with speaking despite regular exposure. The participants were twelve students categorised as having low speaking performance. They were selected purposively on the basis of their scores on a speaking test: students whose scores fell into the low category, together with the English teacher's assessment of their classroom oral performance, were included. This purposive selection ensured that the participants matched the focus of the study.

Data were collected using four instruments. First, classroom observation was used to record the strategies learners actually applied while speaking. Second, a strategy questionnaire adapted from Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) was administered to measure the intensity of use of the six strategy categories on a five-point scale. Third, semi-structured interviews explored the reasons behind learners' strategy choices and the factors influencing them. Fourth, students' speaking test scores were used to confirm their performance level; the test was scored against criteria adapted from Brown (2004), covering fluency, accuracy, vocabulary, pronunciation, and comprehension.

Data collection was carried out over several weeks. Classroom observations were conducted during regular English speaking lessons using an observation checklist; the questionnaire was then administered to the twelve participants; and, finally, individual semi-structured interviews were held to probe the reasons behind their responses. Participation was voluntary, and the learners were assured that their responses would be used solely for research purposes and would not affect their grades.

The data were analysed using interactive qualitative analysis comprising data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Creswell, 2007). Questionnaire responses were summarised as mean scores and interpreted using a three-band scale adapted from Oxford (1990): high use (3.5-5.0), moderate use (2.5-3.4), and low use (1.0-2.4). Observation and interview data were coded thematically and used to explain and corroborate the numerical patterns. To enhance trustworthiness, the study triangulated observation, questionnaire, interview, and test-score data, cross-checking the findings from one source against the others.

The speaking test used to determine the participants' performance level consisted of an individual oral task in which learners responded to familiar prompts and engaged in a short interview with the teacher. Following criteria adapted from Brown (2004), each performance was rated on five components, namely fluency, accuracy, vocabulary, pronunciation, and comprehension, and the scores were combined to place each learner in a performance band. Only those whose overall scores fell within the low band were included as participants, which ensured the homogeneity of the sample with respect to the construct under investigation.

During analysis, the questionnaire data were tabulated and the mean score for each strategy group was calculated across the twelve participants. These means were then interpreted against the three-band scale and displayed in tabular form. In parallel, the observation notes and interview transcripts were read repeatedly, segmented into meaningful units, and coded into categories corresponding to the six strategy groups and to the factors influencing strategy choice. The qualitative codes were subsequently used to interpret and explain the quantitative patterns, so that the numerical trends and the learners' own accounts could be read together.

3. Findings and Discussion

Findings

This section presents the findings for each research question, drawing on the questionnaire, observation, and interview data. The findings are organised around the speaking strategies used by the learners and the factors that influenced their choice of strategies.

3.1. Speaking Strategies Used by Low-Performing Students

The analysis of the questionnaire data showed that students with low speaking performance used all six strategy categories, but at a moderate level of intensity overall. Table 1 summarises the mean scores, the level of intensity, and the interpretation for each category.

Table 1. Intensity of strategy use by students with low speaking performance

Learning strategy	Mean score	Level of intensity	Interpretation
Memory	3.1	Moderate	Sometimes used
Cognitive	3.3	Moderate	Sometimes used
Compensation	2.7	Moderate	Sometimes used
Metacognitive	3.0	Moderate	Sometimes used
Affective	2.8	Moderate	Sometimes used
Social	3.0	Moderate	Sometimes used

As Table 1 shows, none of the strategy categories reached a high level of intensity; all fell within the moderate band, with mean scores between 2.5 and 3.4. Nevertheless, clear differences emerged in the relative frequency of use. Cognitive strategies recorded the highest mean (3.3), followed by memory strategies (3.1), whereas compensation strategies were the least used (2.7), with affective (2.8), metacognitive (3.0), and social (3.0) strategies falling in between. In other words, although the low-performing learners drew on the full range of strategies, they relied most heavily on memory and cognitive strategies, both of which are direct strategies focused on rehearsing and memorising language, and made comparatively little use of compensation and affective strategies.

Observation confirmed the questionnaire results. In speaking lessons, the learners were most often seen relying on memory-based techniques, such as memorising set phrases and short dialogues before performing them, and on cognitive techniques, such as repeating the teacher's model and rehearsing sentences quietly before speaking aloud. These behaviours are consistent with the relatively high mean scores for memory and cognitive strategies and indicate that the learners' preferred route to speaking was through prior preparation rather than spontaneous production.

By contrast, the learners rarely displayed compensation behaviours such as paraphrasing or using gestures to bridge lexical gaps; when they could not find a word, they typically fell silent or switched entirely to Indonesian and abandoned the English utterance. Metacognitive behaviours, such as setting goals for their speaking practice or evaluating their own performance, were also seldom observed. This pattern reinforces the interpretation that low-performing learners possess a limited and unbalanced strategy repertoire, one that equips them to reproduce rehearsed language but not to manage the demands of real-time interaction.

3.2. Factors Influencing the Choice of Strategies

The interview and observation data indicated that the learners' choice of speaking strategies was shaped by several interrelated factors. The most prominent factor was motivation: most of the low-performing students displayed low motivation to learn speaking, which limited both the range and the intensity of the strategies they were willing to use. Learners with weak motivation tended to avoid strategies that required effort or risk-taking, such as compensation and social strategies, and defaulted to more passive, memory-based techniques.

Motivation emerged repeatedly in the interviews as the decisive factor. Several learners explained that they saw little immediate purpose in speaking English within a boarding-school environment where Indonesian and the local language dominate everyday interaction. This weak instrumental motivation reduced their willingness to invest effort in demanding strategies and reinforced their reliance on low-risk, memory-based techniques. The finding is consistent with Oxford (1990), who identifies motivation as one of the strongest determinants of both the quantity and the quality of strategy use.

Attitudes and beliefs functioned as a second, closely related factor. Learners who regarded speaking as inherently difficult, or who feared making mistakes in front of their peers, tended to withdraw from interactive tasks and thus from the social and affective strategies that such tasks require. Age and gender differences were also apparent, echoing Abid, Dagher, and Ridha (2010); some learners reported that cultural expectations about who should speak in class shaped their participation. Together, these factors created a self-reinforcing cycle in which low motivation and negative beliefs narrowed strategy use, and the resulting weak performance further depressed motivation.

Discussion

3.3. Interpreting the Learners' Strategy Use

The prominence of memory and cognitive strategies suggests that the learners were most comfortable with techniques that involve memorising and rehearsing language, such as repeating words, memorising dialogues, and reviewing notes, rather than with strategies that require spontaneous language production. Mariza (2011) reported a comparable pattern among lower-level learners, who tended to prefer memory-oriented techniques, while more advanced learners made greater use of metacognitive and social strategies. This tendency is also consistent with the finding, reported in earlier research, that cognitive strategies are among the most frequently used by language learners in general (Chamot, 2004; Oxford, 1990).

The heavy reliance on memory and cognitive strategies, coupled with limited use of compensation and metacognitive strategies, may partly explain the learners' low performance. Compensation strategies allow speakers to sustain communication despite gaps in knowledge, and metacognitive strategies enable them to plan and monitor their practice; underusing these strategies leaves low-performing learners less able to keep conversations going or to regulate their own improvement. Ellis (1999) and Macaro (2001) emphasise that effective learners orchestrate strategies flexibly according to task demands, an ability that the learners in this study appeared not to have developed. This finding also echoes Junaidi et al. (2015), who observed that less successful learners used strategies less intensively and less purposefully than successful ones.

The relatively low use of affective and social strategies is also noteworthy. Because speaking is an interactive and emotionally demanding skill, the limited use of affective strategies for managing anxiety and of social strategies for interacting with others is likely to hinder oral development. Sofwan, Dian, and Rizaldy (2015) similarly found that learners who engaged more actively in social interaction developed their speaking ability more effectively, which supports the argument that low-performing learners would benefit from greater use of these indirect strategies.

The distribution of strategy use also sheds light on the learners' understanding of what speaking involves. Their concentration on memory and cognitive strategies suggests that they conceived of speaking primarily as the accurate reproduction of memorised language, rather than as a negotiated, interactive process. This conception may itself be a product of instruction that emphasises form and rehearsal, and it points to the need for teachers to broaden learners' view of speaking to include interaction, risk-taking, and communication under real-time constraints.

3.4. Influencing Factors, Implications, and Limitations

Beyond motivation, the data pointed to attitudes and beliefs, gender, age, and speaking proficiency level as further influences. Learners who believed that speaking was inherently difficult, or who held negative attitudes toward classroom interaction, restricted their strategy use accordingly. These findings align with Oxford (1990) and Zare (2012), who identify motivation, attitudes and beliefs, gender, age, and proficiency as key variables shaping strategy choice. The influence of gender and proficiency observed in this study is consistent with Abid, Daghir, and Ridha (2010), who found that learners' gender and proficiency level were significantly related to their choice of language learning strategies. The boarding-school context appears to reinforce these factors: with the curriculum's strong emphasis on religious studies, learners have fewer opportunities and less encouragement to take communicative risks in English.

Taken together, the findings suggest that low speaking performance is associated less with a total absence of strategy use than with an imbalanced and low-intensity strategy repertoire, driven largely by motivational and attitudinal factors. This interpretation has direct pedagogical implications: rather than assuming that low-performing learners do not use strategies, teachers should recognise that these learners use a narrow set of strategies weakly, and should intervene to broaden and strengthen their repertoire.

The findings carry important pedagogical implications for the teaching of speaking in Islamic boarding schools and similar contexts. Because the low-performing learners in this study used a narrow and low-intensity range of strategies, explicit strategy-based instruction is likely to be more beneficial for them than mere exposure to English. Chamot (2004) argues that strategies can and should be taught directly, through awareness-raising, teacher modelling, guided practice, and the gradual transfer of responsibility to learners. Integrating such instruction into speaking lessons, by teaching learners how to plan a spoken task, how to use circumlocution when they lack vocabulary, and how to manage their anxiety, could help them convert isolated techniques into an orchestrated and purposeful repertoire (Oxford, 2003). As Brown (2007) suggests, learners with low speaking performance should be encouraged in particular to increase their use of cognitive and social strategies, which are closely associated with more effective oral development.

These results extend previous strategy research in two ways. First, whereas much of the literature has documented the strategies of successful learners (Junaidi et al., 2015; Mariza, 2011), the present study foregrounds the strategic profile of learners at the lower end of the proficiency range, showing that their difficulty lies not in the absence of strategies but in a narrow and shallow use of them. Second, by situating the analysis in an Islamic boarding school, the study highlights how contextual factors particular to the pesantren, including the primacy of religious study and the scarcity of authentic English interaction, interact with individual factors to shape strategy use. This contextual reading is consistent with Macaro (2001), who stresses that strategy use must be understood in relation to the learning environment in which it occurs.

Finally, the convergence of the questionnaire, observation, and interview data strengthens confidence in these findings. The fact that learners reported moderate strategy use, were observed relying mainly on memory and cognitive techniques, and explained their choices in terms of motivation and belief all point to the same conclusion: that supporting low-performing learners requires broadening their strategy repertoire while simultaneously addressing the affective and contextual conditions that constrain it.

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting these findings. The study relied on a small, purposively selected sample of twelve learners in a single institution, and the strategy data were gathered largely through self-report and observation, which are subject to learners' awareness and the observer's interpretation. The questionnaire, though adapted from a well-established instrument, captures reported frequency rather than the quality of strategy use. Future research could therefore employ larger and more diverse samples, longitudinal designs, and stimulated-recall

interviews to capture strategy use as it unfolds in real time, and could test whether explicit strategy-based instruction measurably improves the speaking performance of low-achieving learners..

3.5. The Influence of the Merdeka Curriculum on the Development of English Textbooks

The emergence of various studies on critical thinking skills in English textbooks during the period of 2023–2025 indicates a close relationship with the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia. This curriculum positions critical reasoning as one of the dimensions of the Pancasila Student Profile that should be fostered across different subjects, including English (Kemdikbudristek, 2022)

However, the synthesis findings suggest that curriculum transformation has not been fully accompanied by a corresponding transformation in instructional materials. (Hasnah et al., 2024) reported that critical thinking indicators such as argumentation, evaluation, and reflection have not yet been optimally represented in Indonesian EFL textbooks. In addition, (Zebua et al., 2021) revealed that HOTS-oriented activities in the English for Nusantara textbook remain largely concentrated at the analysis level and have not extensively reached the levels of evaluation and creation.

These findings indicate a discrepancy between curriculum objectives and their implementation within textbooks. Although the Merdeka Curriculum has provided broader opportunities for the development of twenty-first-century skills, textbooks, as one of the primary learning resources, have not yet been fully capable of translating these expectations into concrete learning activities.

Therefore, the development of textbooks in the era of the Merdeka Curriculum needs to be carried out in a more systematic manner by integrating critical thinking indicators into every stage of the learning process. Such integration should not only be manifested through the formulation of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) questions but also through the provision of reading activities that encourage students to engage in discussions, construct arguments, evaluate information, and solve problems based on real-life contexts.

4. Conclusion

This study examined the speaking strategies used by students with low speaking performance at MA NWDI Rensing Bat and the factors influencing their choices. The findings show that these learners used all six of Oxford's (1990) strategy categories at a moderate level of intensity, relying most heavily on cognitive and memory strategies and least on compensation strategies. Their choice of strategies was influenced mainly by motivation, attitudes and beliefs, gender, age, and speaking proficiency level, with low motivation emerging as the dominant factor.

These results suggest that low speaking performance is linked to an imbalanced and low-intensity use of strategies rather than to their complete absence. Pedagogically, teachers are encouraged to provide explicit strategy-based instruction that strengthens learners' use of cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies, and to foster the motivation and positive attitudes that underpin effective strategy use. Because the study involved only twelve students in a single Islamic boarding school, its findings are not intended to be generalised; further research with larger and more varied samples, and with mixed-methods designs, is recommended to confirm and extend these findings.

Beyond its pedagogical recommendations, the study underscores the importance of addressing the motivational and attitudinal roots of weak strategy use. Strategy training is unlikely to succeed if learners remain unconvinced of the value of speaking English or continue to fear failure; teachers therefore need to combine explicit strategy instruction with efforts to build learners' confidence and to create low-anxiety opportunities for authentic communication. In boarding-school contexts, this might involve integrating English into daily activities and peer interaction so that strategy use is practised in meaningful situations rather than in isolated drills.

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