

## **Students' Voices on English Language Uses in an Islamic Boarding School in Gorontalo**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In the Islamic boarding school settings as in Indonesia, all the students are required to master English language for their daily interaction, starting from year 7 up to 12. However, the students who are beginners may often feel challenged with it. The present of study, therefore, seeks to discover the students' voices on English language uses outside classroom context at one of the Islamic boarding schools located in the Province of Gorontalo. The participants of this study were the students sitting at the junior high school level. Informed by a qualitative approach, data were collected by using observation fieldnotes and interview protocols, and analyzed using a thematic analysis. The findings showed that there were four themes representing students' voices: lack of preparation, language learning preference, language use preference, and English use challenges. The findings suggest that the boarding school may need to create programs that encourage the students to learn and master English, and to facilitate them in making the most of their English language learning.

*Keywords: Students' voices, ELT, Islamic Boarding School*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Boarding school plays a very important role in the educational world. In the context of Indonesia, for instance, the establishment of boarding school, such as Islamic Boarding School, allows the transformation of socio-cultural development to take place across society (Fathurrochman et al., 2021). Many contemporary Islamic Boarding Schools now has also embrace various level of education to comply with the national curriculum of Indonesia (Fathurrochman et al., 2021). To face the global competition, students are required to have the capability to master international languages. Being able in mastering international language can be prepared through educational institutions, for example, Islamic boarding school or *Pesantren* in Bahasa Indonesia.

Islamic boarding schools offer foreign language teaching, such as Arabic & English. *Santris* (student who are living in Islamic boarding school) are required to master both foreign languages. Foreign language skill is the main capital that the students should achieve successfully for facing the competition. Using foreign language intends to improve the

students' knowledge in Islamic study and science through their English communication engagement (Departemen Agama, 2011).

Unlike the common of educational institutions particularly in Indonesia, Islamic boarding school has twenty-four hours educational system (Mukhlas & Fadhilah, 2016). It means that all students are required to stay in boarding school during the learning process. During twenty-four hours learning process, the school makes rule for students. The students are required to speak English in their daily conversation. Daily conversation is one way to promote foreign language speaking improvement through daily communication (Mukhlas & Fadhillah, 2016). Daily conversation can support student in attempting to be more proficient in foreign language speaking.

Yet, foreign language learners often encounter problems in their attempts to learn to speak the language, such as in when learning English. Richard (1990) stated that the types of students' problem in learning to speak English are: 1) students cannot sustain spoken interaction beyond segments, 2) frequent communication breakdowns, 3) lack of vocabulary needed to talk about common utterances, 4) lack of communication, and 5) cannot participate actively in conversation. These are the common problem that students find and may make them feel not confident to speak English and prevent them from comfortably practicing their English-speaking skill. The study reported in this article is, therefore, attempts to find out what the students think about using English as part of their everyday means of communication.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Many countries in the world, including Indonesia, has adopted English as part of the national curriculum. It is a foreign language taught as a compulsory subject in secondary and tertiary education institution. The purpose of teaching this language is, one of which, to help the students with the ability to read English textbooks on their related fields as they continue study to higher educational level. Given this, society who live in the countries of English as Foreign Language (EFL) like Indonesia, they usually talk English more with their friends rather than with native speaker of English. The number of people in the world who communicate English with international speakers is steadily rising compared to other language speakers (Crystal, 1997).

Due to English status as a global language, the Indonesian governments decided to oblige people to learn English in all secondary level schools and other private schools. In fact, they have been taught English from elementary to tertiary level education or higher degree who perceive that that English language learning has a significant role in the educational system in Indonesia. At secondary level English as an obligatory lesson from junior high school to senior high school. Furthermore, some private institutions introduce compulsory English for students from elementary level and some other used it as instructional language in all classes. Related to the enthusiasm of English as an international language and as a language of science, this language is applied in junior high school and university level as a foreign language, sometimes English used in outside classes. However, the teaching of English in Indonesia in many parts of the country has been labelled as to be unsuccessful for various reasons (Gunantar, 2016). This can be seen from the fact after the school ends, many Indonesian students cannot use English properly in their communication.

In the context of Islamic boarding school, English is an integrated part of the teaching process. At such schools, in addition to Indonesian and local languages, Arabic and English are compulsory subjects (Bin Tahir, et al., 2018). Both languages are used on a daily basis in daily communication. The purpose of requiring foreign languages in this school was to improve students' knowledge of Islamic study and science through the use of their language skills (Bin Tahir, et al., 2019). Yet, studies on students' English-speaking skills in the context of Islamic

boarding school have shown different results. Bin Tahir, et. al (2018), for instance found that there was a gap of speaking performance between motivated and less motivated students when involving in English interaction. Likewise, a study by Khodaifi (2021) revealed that students, as well as their teachers, faced particular challenges when attempting to integrate the use of foreign language like English in an Islamic Boarding School, such as time management and finding appropriate bilingual model. Little is understood, however, about students' voices in using English as language for their daily interaction in the boarding school. This present study, therefore, sought to fill this void.

## **METHOD**

In this study, a qualitative research approach was employed. A qualitative research focuses on the explanation of social phenomena (Hancock, 1998). Data were collected from students studying in an Islamic Boarding School located in the Province of Gorontalo, with a research permission approval from the school headmaster. To recruit them as research participants, a specific requirement was used. Targeted participants who were the representative students with the best and lowest academic achievement were invited, following their teachers' recommendation. All these students participated voluntarily in the present study, which means that they could withdraw any time during the period of data collection. To analyse the data, a thematic analysis was used. Findings of this study are presented in the form of narrative presentation, along with relevant interview quotes and observation fieldnotes.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **FINDINGS**

There are four themes which represent the participants' voices: lack of preparation, language learning preference, language use preference, and English use challenges. The following paragraphs elaborate on each of these themes.

#### **LACK OF PREPARATION**

Lack of preparation refers to a person who wants to talk in the English language but is not ready or do not have any preparation related to English vocabularies, grammar and pronunciation. Stud1, for instance, stated that he was ready to use English in the Boarding School because he never learnt English in Elementary school and only learnt English from an English course, but he had forgot all the lessons from the course.

“Awalnya saya tidak tau kalo disini pake bahasa inggris, dan saya juga tidak siap, karena di SD tidak di ajarkan bahasa Inggris, dan yang saya sudah belajar akan di kursus saya sudah lupa.” (Stud1: 10)

First time in here, I do not know we have to speak English and I am not ready, because in Elementary School I never learn English language and I forgot what I learned from course (Researcher's translation)

Stud4 added that he was not ready to use English because he learned English at the sixth grade in elementary school but it was only Basic English.

“Sebenarnya saya belum siap kalo menggunakan bahasa inggris karena saya punya kosakata bahasa inggris tidak ada yang saya tau, di SD juga nanti kelas 6 ada belajar itupun cuma dasar-dasarnya.” (Stud4: 86)

Actually, I am not ready to use English language because I do not know the vocabularies and in the Elementary School, I only learn (English) at sixth grade but only basic (English). (Researcher's translation)

In addition, Stud8 reported that learning English until second grade of Elementary School was a very short time.

“Kalo untuk penggunaan bahasa inggris pas masuk disini saya belum siap sih kak, ya karena itu tadi pembelajaran bahasa nggris yang berhenti hanya sampai dikelas 2 SD, saya rasa itu depe waktu singkat sekali kak.” (Stud8: 171)

I am not ready to use English when the first time I came here, as I told you, learning English until second grade of Elementary school was very short time. (Researcher's translation)

Similarly, with stud6 stated that he only learnt basic English from the elementary school.

“Pertama kali maso di pesantren saya belum siap pakai bahasai nggri suntuk berbicara karena vocabulary yang saya tau juga cuma sedikit, dari SD juga Cuma itu yang diajarkan, hanya seperti pengenalan em...pokoknya yang dasar-dasar begitu.” (Stud6: 127)

The first time I came here, I am not ready to speak English because I have limited English vocabularies and from the Elementary School also, I only learned English like introduction and basic English only. (Researcher's translation)

The data above shows that the duration to learn English is one of the factors that influence students' preparation. The students confirmed that they learnt English only for a short period of time during school and it made them feel unprepared to speak English as they started studying in the boarding school. In the following paragraphs, findings related to the participants' language learning preference is presented.

#### LANGUAGE LEARNING PREFERENCE

Language learning preference is defined as students' passion or students' interests in language learning. In this case, the students reported that they were not interested in learning English because they preferred to use Arabic than English. For example, Stud1 reported that he really liked Arabic and Indonesian rather than English. When in boarding school, he said, he liked to speak Arabic rather than English.

“Kalo disekitar sini, saya lebih suka bahasa arab atau bahasa Indonesia, karena jujur saya lebih suka bahasa Arab.” (Stud1: 14)

In here (boarding school), I prefer to use Arabic or Indonesian, to be honest I like Arabic than English language. (Researcher's translation)

Similarly, Stud3 stated that he likes to use Arabic when speaking.

“Saya di sini pake bahasa Inggris kadang-kadang karena em.... kurang kosakata dengan sayalebih suka pake bahasa Arab.” (Stud3: 67)

In here, sometimes I use English because I have limited vocabularies and I like using Arabic language. (Researcher's translation)

Stud2 also added that most of the male students always use Arabic because Arabic is easier than the English language.

“Di sini saya pake bahasa inggris Cuma kadang-kadang sih karena em....torang yang putra sering pakai bahasa arab karena lebe gampang dari bahasa inggris kak.” (Stud2: 42)

Here (boarding school) sometimes I speak English because most of the male students always use Arabic language, because Arabic language is easier than English language. (Researcher’s translation)

This is also supported by the observation filed-notes where the researcher found that the students rarely used English when there was no teacher around them. For example, the researcher’s observation on Tuesday, 22nd October 2019.

*Ada 5 orang (putra) SMP berjalan dari kantin menuju kelas. Mereka berbincang- bincang menggunakan bahasa Indonesia ke sesama mereka.* (Researcher’s observation; footway in front of the canteen)

Five students (boys) are walking from canteen to classes. They were talking each other by using Indonesian language.” (Researcher’s translation)

Another researcher’s observation found that the students use English rarely and sometimes use Arabic. Researcher’s observation on Thursday, 24th October 2019.

*2 orang siswa kelas VII (putra) yang akan memasuki kelas, mereka berbincang-bincang menggunakan bahasa Indonesia sambil sesekali mengucap bahasa arab. Ketika bertemu dengan guru bahasa Inggris, mereka menyapanya dengan bahasa inggris.* (Researcher’s observation; in front the VII classes of boys)

Two students of junior high school (boys) are walking into the class, they were talking each other by using Indonesian and sometimes speak Arabic language. (The researcher’s translation)

On the other hand, the observation revealed that the students were using English when they met their English teachers and the leader of dormitory. This is appearing on researcher’s observation on Friday, 25th October 2019.

*Ada empat orang siswa yang sedang duduk di depan asrama putra, mereka berbincang-bincang menggunakan bahasa inggris dan sedikit-sedikit terdengar juga bahasa arab. Ketika kepala asrama dan guru bahasa inggris melintas di depan mereka, mereka langsung menyapa dengan mengucap salam dalam bahasa arab dan bahasa Inggris”. (Researchers’ observation; in front of the Boys Dormitory)*

Four students (boys) are sitting in front of boys dormitory, they are talking little bit speak English and sometimes use Arabic, when the English teacher and the leader of dormitory are walking in front of them they were greeting to them by using English language. (Researcher’s translation)

The data above reported that uninterested feeling in the English language become an obstacle in learning English. When the students feel comfortable to use one language, they will always practice that language every time and forget the other language that they have learned, especially English. Alongside the students experiencing issues related to learning language preference, the students also reported to learning use preference.

#### LANGUAGE USE PREFERENCE

Learning use preference refers to students who speak English in their certain time according to when and whom they speak to. Stud1, for example, stated that he only spoke English when he is in the classroom, in dormitory, meet the English teacher and the leader of dormitory.

“Saya selalu pake bahasa inggris kalo nanti di kelas, di asrama dengan kalo nanti di mo ketemu dengan kepala asrama baru deng guru bahasa Inggris.”(Stud: 14)

I always use English when I am in the classroom, in doormitory and meet the leader of doormitory, and also English teacher. (Researcher’s translation)

Stud5 added that he only spoke in English when he met friends who also spoke English.

“Kalo dengan teman-teman em.....yang bisa berbahasa Inggris, saya bicara bahasa Inggris tapi kalo dengan orang yang tidak terlalu tau bahasa inggris itu saya pake bahasa Indonesia.” (Stud5: 108)

When I am with my friends who use English language, I speak English but when with people not really know English I speak Indonesian language. (Researcher’s translation)

The data above was supported by researcher’s observation where the researcher found in boy’s dormitory, the students always use Indonesian language and sometimes, in their conversation they use Arabic language. For example, below is the researcher’s observation on Thursday, 24th October 2019.

*Hari ini saya mengamati 2 orang siswa kelas VII (Putra) yang akan memasuki kelas, mereka berbincang-bincang menggunakan bahasa Indonesia sambil sesekali mengucap bahasa Arab. Ketika bertemu dengan guru bahasa inggris, mereka menyapanya dengan bahasa Inggris.* (Researches’ observation; in front of the VII boy classes)

The researcher observed two students of junior high school (boys) who will enter the class, they were talking each other by using Indonesian and sometimes speak Arabic language. (Researcher’s translation)

Other observation done on Thursday, 24th October 2019 revealed that the students only spoke English when they met their English teacher and the leader of dormitory.

*Empat orang siswa yang sedang duduk di depan asrama putra, mereka berbincang-bincang menggunakan bahasa inggris dan sedikit-sedikit terdengar juga bahasa arab. ketika kepala asrama dan guru bahasa inggris melintas di depan mereka, merka langsung menyapa dengan mengucap salam dalam bahasa arab dan bahasainggris.* (Researchers’ observation; in front of boy’s dormitory)

There are four students (boys) sitting in front of boys dormitory, they are talking little bit speak English and sometimes use Arabic, when the English teacher and the leader of dormitory are walking in front of them they were greeting to them by using English language. (Researcher’s translation)

The researcher’s observation on Friday, 25th October 2019 found that the students use Indonesian language when they were talking each other and directly changed when the researcher approached them.

*Dua orang siswa SMP sedang mengambil air wudhu di tempat wudhu, ketika saya masih jauh mereka menggunakan bahasa Indonesia, tapi ketika saya mendekat mereka langsung menggunakan bahasa Arab. (Researchers' observation; in front of Mosque)*

Two students are taking *wudhu* (the ritual ablution before pray), when the researcher still far from them, they Indonesian but when the researcher was near to them, they changed their language to Arabic. (Researchers' translation)

The data above shows that they do not use English every time according to the rule of the boarding school. They do not follow the rule when there is no teacher around them and they have their own time to use English language. They speak English according to their situation and who are involved in the situation. A further analysis of data presented of this section showed the English uses challenges for students.

#### ENGLISH USE CHALLENGES

Speaking English gives challenges for students where the rules in the boarding school require the students to speak English in their daily life, no matter how challenging it is for them. Stud3 confirmed that his challenge to use English in boarding school was having limited English vocabulary capacity and the problem was he does not fully understand about the English skill.

“Kalo saya, tantanganya pake bahasa inggris itu tidak hafal vocabulary, masalahnya ada yang saya paham dan ada yang tidak, jadi saya harus em... banyak menghafal vocabulary lagi”. (Stud3: 69)

The challenge that I found when using English is I do not memorized vocabularies, the problem is another word (in English) I understand and others I am still do not understand so I have to memorize more the English vocabularies. (Researcher's translation)

Stud6 stated that his challenge was difficulties to pronounce English word (pronunciation).

“Tantanganya itu susah sekali untuk berbicara dan tidak terbiasa, tapi disini saya berusaha untuk mencoba-coba untuk em.. mengucapkan kata-kata dalam bahasa Inggris.” (Stud6: 131)

The challenge is difficult to speak (English word) and not usual (Speak English), so in here, I try to pronounce the word in English. (Researcher's translation)

Similarly, Stud9 reported that she found it hard to pronounce English word, she also less vocabularies and grammar.

“Tantanganya itu kak, cara pengucapannya kak saya tidak tau, masih susah dan masalahnya itu kak kalo misalkan mau bercakap-cakap dengan teman-teman terus belum terlalu hafal vocab deng grammar.” (Stud9: 202)

The challenge is, I do not know the English pronunciation, it still hard for me and the problem is when I want to talk with my friends and I do not know the vocabularies and grammar. (Researcher's translation)

Stud8 also stated that his challenge was adaption with the language. In order she can speak English when she meets the teacher, and senior.

“Tantanganya itu kak, saya harus beradaptasi dengan bahasa Inggris, terus harus lebih banyak belajar kosakata bahasa Inggris supaya bisabercakap-cakap dengan teman, guru atau kakak kelas.” (Stud8: 177)

The challenge is, I have to adapt with English language, and then I have to learn more English vocabulary, so I can speak English with friends, teacher and senior. (Researcher’s translation)

Additionally, Stud5 stated that, to arrange sentence is very difficult so, he still learn to arrange sentence itself.

“Saya juga masih belajar em.. menyusun kata-kata kalo mo jadi kalimat, soalnya susah sekali kak.” (Stud5: 112)

I am still learning how to arrange vocabularies become sentence, because it is very hard for me. (Researcher’s translation)

The students’ statement was evidenced by researcher’s observation, where the student especially female students try to speak English or interact by using English, even though they do not know using grammar correctly at least they can speak English. For example, on researcher’s observation on Tuesday, 22nd October 2019.

*Hari ini ada 4 siswa (Putri) SMP yang sedang makan di kantin. Saat memesan makanan mereka menggunakan bahasa Indonesia, tapi ketika mereka berbicara terhadap sesama mereka menggunakan bahasa Inggris walaupun masih terbata-bata. (Researcher’s observation, at the canteen)*

Today the researcher observed 4 girls were eating in canteen. When they ordered the food they use Indonesian language but when they were talking with their friends they use English even though they speak English haltingly. (Researcher’s translation)

Another observation, the researcher found that the female students interact each other by using English, and changed the vocabulary in Indonesian language when they do not know the words in English. Researcher’s observation on Thursday, October 24th 2019.

*Ada sembilan orang siswa di depan kelas mereka yang sedang menunggu giliran untuk ujian. mereka berinteraksi menggunakan bahasa Inggris dan sesekali menggunakan bahasa Indonesia ketika mereka tidak mengetahui bahasa Inggrisnya. (Researcher’s observation; in front of VII girls’ classes)*

There are nine students in front of the classes, they were waiting their examination turn to enter the classes. They were interacted each other by using English language and sometimes speak Indonesia to the word that they do not know in English language. (Researcher’s translation)

In addition, the researcher found that the female students by using English language.

*Dua orang siswa sedang sharing satusama lain dengan menggunakan bahasa Inggris. (Researcher’s observation; in front of the girl’s dormitory)*

Two students (female) are sharing each other by using English language. (Researcher’s translation)

## **DISCUSSION**

The first theme related to the students' voices about lack of preparation. From the finding, there are four data reported that they are not ready to use English every day because they have limited time to learn English when they were in Elementary school. It seems they do not have enough knowledge in English because they had less preparation to speak English. Four students were found and they reported that they were not ready to speak English everyday because they do not have enough preparation. They thought that their time to learn English in Elementary school was inadequate. One of the reasons why English learning in primary schools often face challenges is attributed to the profile of the English teachers, and to the appropriate and stimulating learning resources (Azmy, 2020).

The second identified theme is language learning preference. Language learning preference refers to students' interested in learning a language. The data revealed that three students perceived that they did not feel interested in learning English and they preferred speaking in Arabic. The students stated that the Arabic language is easy to learn rather than English. The statement show that the students' lack of interested in learning English because English is difficult to learn. Amjah (2014) reported that for some students, learning English as foreign language is very difficult subject that they have to learn, due to the difficulties in learning English can make students lose their interest easily. Abid (2019) also confirmed that many English language learners always find difficulties despite prolonged formal language training they have, and this is influenced by a wide range of factors, such as teacher profile, curriculum in use, students' prior learning, and exposure to language use in and outside classes.

Language use preference is the third theme. Language use preference is defined as students' using English only in certain time. The students' stated that they use English depend on when and whom they speak. According to Burkart (1998) one of knowledge involved within speaking that English language learner to have is relative roles of students, where the students have to understand how to take into account who is speaking to whom and in what circumstances. The statement above indicates that as foreign language students who are living in boarding school, they have to establish the boarding school's environment as their relative roles to speak English each other. This way can be the opportunity for students to increase their English fluency. Also, the teacher have to take a role to motivate students in learning English. Abid (2019) reported that increasing students' proficiency in English requires the teacher assisting the students to build confidence by putting the language they learn into practice.

The fourth theme found is English use challenges. Most of the junior high school students lack of English proficiency but they felt challenged to learn more English skill. Furthermore, they also confirmed that, the one of factor students' feel curiosity to learn English is when students find the challenges in learning English and to overcome the English challenges is giving the student time to practice English in their daily life. The students have to motivate themselves to learn English in order to increase their proficiency in English. Also, it may cause by teachers who taught English, they may unprepared well before giving the material to students or even they do not have enough experience in English teaching. Thus, it is became the factor the students feel English is difficult to learn. Almost every student has the same challenges in learning English, for example in vocabulary, grammar pronunciation, adaptation with English and try to arrange sentence.

## **CONCLUSION**

The result of study indicated that the participating students lack preparation of using English during their early encounter to the language tuition in the elementary school. Also, they reported that they had little interest in learning English and preferred speaking in Arabic,

instead, as they continued to learning the language in high school. The students stated that the Arabic language is easy to learn rather than English. Moreover, they stated that they use English depend on when and whom they would speak to. They also need to motivate themselves to learn English in order to increase their proficiency in English. What is crucial for them is to have continued and stimulating support that encourage them to make the most of their English language learning, as well as English-driven communication in the school. Despite the fact that the findings of this study cannot be generalised, it at least attempts to provide a picture of how boarding school students view the use of English as part of their everyday communication in the context of Indonesia religious-based boarding school.

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