

# IMPROVING STUDENTS' ENGLISH-SPEAKING SKILLS THROUGH BEHAVIOUR MODIFICATION IN INDONESIAN ISLAMIC BOARDING SCHOOLS

Ahmad Izzuddin

Izzu0001@student.monash.edu

Monash University, Australia

**Abstract.** A number of modern Islamic Boarding Schools (IBS) have long implemented a unique English Language Teaching (ELT) strategy in improving their students' English-speaking skills. In IBS, for example, head of language department requires the students to communicate in English in daily activities, and punishment is imposed to those who do not speak English. However, there was no specifically academic term used to describe such strategy, nor was there a study to investigate the effectiveness of the strategy. This essay investigates what IBS-applied ELT strategy is, and to what extent it is effective in improving speaking skills of the students. It is found that IBS has made use of a behaviour modification as ELT strategy. The behaviour modification is able to encourage students to communicate in English in their daily activities. It also leads students to acquire accuracy, complexity and fluency in speaking.

Key Words: Behaviour Modification, Extrinsic Motivation, Speaking Skills, Accuracy, Complexity, and Fluency.

## INTRODUCTION

English-speaking skills among Indonesian students need to be developed as a means of effective communication. However, when it comes to the most effective strategies in improving students' speaking skills, the issue remains questionable. In many modern Islamic Boarding Schools (IBS) in Indonesia, for example, in terms of improving students' speaking skills, English has been officially determined as a language of instruction (Pohl, 2006). Students must communicate in English in their daily activities especially outside classrooms. If they are found not speaking English, Head and Members of Language Department in IBS will impose them punishment (Fakhrudin& Megawati, 2018). As a result, it is assumed that students will always communicate in English; therefore, their English-speaking skills will improve.

Even though this language development strategy has long been implemented in IBS context, there is no specific term used by researchers to describe such strategy, nor was research conducted in investigating the effectiveness of the strategy in improving students' speaking skills (see Habibi&Sofwan, 2016; Bin-Tahir, 2015; Bin-Tahir et al., 2017;

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Fakhrudin& Megawati, 2018). Therefore, a further study is needed to describe what IBS-applied English language teaching (ELT) strategy is and to investigate its effectiveness in improving students' English-speaking skills.

This essay argues that IBS has actually adopted a behaviour modification as their English language teaching (ELT) strategy. The essay also argues that IBS-applied behaviour modification is effective to encourage students to speak English and improve their English-speaking skills. Behaviour modification is defined as "the consistent application of positive or negative consequences to reinforce the occurrence of a desirable behaviour and/or to reduce the occurrence of an undesirable behaviour" (Diedrich, 2010, p. 5). It includes the giving of reinforcement and punishment to the students.

The study is significant for some reasons. Firstly, to understand what strategy has been long implemented in IBS and how far it is effective for the improvement of students' speaking skills. As research on the issue is lack, this investigation will contribute to enrich the existing educational discourses on ELT in Indonesia. Secondly, it can be used as an academic work by instructors and head of language department in IBS to evaluate the effectiveness of IBS-applied ELT strategy. Thirdly, it will shed the light to the students that IBS-applied behaviour modification is effective; therefore, they understand why a behaviour modification has been applied to them. This does matter since students sometimes complain about such compelling teaching strategy.

This essay investigates what IBS-applied ELT strategy is, and to what extent it is effective in improving speaking skills of the students.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### *Introduction to Behaviour Modification in IBS context*

Research on ELT in IBS context was conducted by many Indonesian researchers; however, when it came to what kind of language teaching system was applied in IBS, there was no specific definition used by the researchers. For instance, Fakhrudin and Megawati (2018) called IBS-applied ELT strategy 'army method' instruction. They mentioned "In the class, students are learning under army method scheme which provides reward and punishment to organize the class" (p. 50). In addition, other researchers (i.e., Nurjaman, 2013; Habibi&Sofwan, 2016) did not implicitly define the teaching and learning instructions used in IBS. Instead, they just classified that IBS-applied ELT system was about forcing students to speak English. No academically specific term was used.

Turning to the use of 'army method' instruction proposed by Fakhrudin and Megawati (2018), here are some critics. First, the term 'army method' may lead to misunderstanding and confusion. It is true that IBS has implemented punishment and reinforcement as strategies to improve students' speaking skills, despite this such teaching strategies are far different from those applied in military academy. Second, the term 'army method' does not stem from academic terminology. There is no such term in the academic discourses especially those in education. Therefore, it is important to define ELT system which has been long implemented in IBS.

Behaviour modification consists of two main features; reinforcement and punishment. In the one hand, reinforcement is defined as "the attempt to elicit a desirable behaviour through either the introduction of a pleasant aspect of work or the removal of an unpleasant aspect of work" (Heery& Noon, 2017, p. 144). Furthermore, it is assumed that reinforcement and motivation have positive relationship. A study by Diedrich (2010) on relationship between reinforcement and students' motivation indicated that positive reinforcement was claimed to be effective in fostering students' motivation.

On the other hand, the word punishment in the context of behaviour modification refers to "a process in which the consequence of a behaviour result in future decrease in the

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occurrence of that behaviour” (Miltenberger, 2014, p. 108). In other words, punishment means an attempt to weaken or reduce a specific behaviour of a person. It is not meant to punish the person, but the behaviour. This is important to be noticed since people might misunderstand about this technical term, considering the punishment has much to do with those who commit crime or inappropriate behaviour.

#### *Behaviour Modification in IBS Context*

Islamic Boarding School (IBS), also known as *pesantren* (Dhofier, 1990; Zakaria, 2016; Sari, 2017), is a secondary-level of Islamic educational institution which manages both formal and informal education units such as junior high schools and senior high schools (Esposito, 2003; Busyairi, 2017). Formal education is undertaken in schools while informal education is conducted in boarding houses. Therefore, students who are studying in IBS have to reside in the boarding houses close to the schools (Martin, Brad, Paul, & Erik, 2016). IBS provides their students many activities ranging from Islamic teachings to language development programs (i.e. Arabic and English) (Zulfiqar Bin Tahir, 2015). Furthermore, a number of modern IBS have regulated the use of English as a language of instruction (Bin-Tahir et al., 2017; Pohl, 2006). Students are obliged to speak English in daily activities and punishment is imposed to those who are found not to speak English (see Fakhruddin & Megawati, 2018; Risdianto, 2016). In the academic terminology, IBS-applied English language teaching (ELT) system can be called a behaviour modification strategy.

The implementation of ELT in IBS context includes similar features to those in behaviour modification. Studies on how ELT has been conducted in IBS context (see Bin-Tahir, 2015, Bin-Tahir et al., 2017; Fakhruddin & Megawati, 2018; Habibi & Sofwan, 2016; Nurjaman, 2013) share common similarities that IBS-applied ELT system has a number of characteristics such as

Taking into consideration the characteristic of IBS-applied ELT system mentioned above, it can be asserted that even though researchers have never specifically called ELT conducted in IBS context a behaviour modification strategy, such strategy has been long implemented. This used to occur in academic discourses where the term was not discovered, but it had already been used. As Ericksen (1974) wrote:

“Psychology did not discover or invent the term [reinforcement], and teachers have been meeting out combinations of rewards and punishment to students for hundreds of years and they will continue to do so, with or without knowledge of the principles of reinforcement and their relation to learning” (p. 98).

The claim will be more obvious when IBS-applied ELT system is investigated. One of behaviour modification characteristics used in IBS is the use of punishment to modify students’ behaviour, that is, encouraging students to always speak English. For example, in terms of imposing punishment, head and members of language department in IBS are accustomed to monitoring students’ boarding houses to check if there may be any students who do not communicate in English. If some students are found not to speak English, punishment will be imposed to them. Should the students keep committing the violation, the head of language department will report them to the board of teachers (Fakhruddin & Megawati, 2018; Risdianto, 2016).

Such punishment is given to make the behaviour modification work since the effectiveness of punishment also depends on how immediate the punishment is imposed after the actions occur. According to Miltenberger (2014), some of factors contributing to the effectiveness of punishment are immediacy and contingency. Immediacy means that

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punishment is given immediately following the occurrence of the behaviour. The longer the delay occurs between behaviour and punishment, the more ineffective the punishment becomes. Contingency means that punishment is imposed as the behaviour occurs. In other words, punishment must be applied consistently.

However, it is important to notice that punishment in IBS is imposed wisely and appropriately. IBS has avoided the use of punishment which includes painful stimuli. In the case of *Ta'mirul Islam* Islamic Boarding School, for example, the use of corporal punishment is not allowed (Risdiyanto, 2016). Instead, the punishment will take shape in different form which is more educative and motivational for the students. The use of educational punishment to maximize the effectiveness of the behaviour modification is in line with Miltenberger's suggestion. Miltenberger (2014) suggested that the use of appropriate punishment is necessary; otherwise, it will result in negative effects. Accordingly, the use of painful stimuli, for example, will generate emotional reactions from those who are punished. It will also generate the opportunity of students' escape or avoidance from the punishment so that the students will try to lie to avoid the punishment. This is of course counterproductive with the intended use of the punishment in IBS context, that is, to improve students' speaking skills.

To conclude, language teaching system used in IBS can be defined as a behaviour modification. However, behaviour modification in IBS tend to emphasize on the use of punishment instead of reinforcement. Establishment of punishment is aimed at making IBS-applied behaviour modification work. In other words, it is implemented to encourage students to speak English.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study is a library research in which the data is gotten from the researcher's observation and experiences, then combined with some library findings.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### *Encouragement through Punishment*

IBS has language department officers to enforce students to speak English. They give punishment to those who are found not to speak English. Punishment is aimed at encouraging the students to always use English in their daily activities. An interview with a head of language department in *Al-Amanah* Islamic Boarding School indicates that IBS makes use of punishment to improve their students' speaking skills by forcing them to communicate in English.

“Yes, we are the one who give them punishment and warning for those who don't use our official language. But, if they keep repeating same mistake, we will report them to the board of teachers. During our daily operation, we cooperate with dormitory officials. Our member(s) of language department also often walk through inside the buildings to patrol language application” (Fakhruddin& Megawati, 2018, p. 61).

In other words, IBS by making use of punishment requires students to always speak English as daily communication language.

Furthermore, it is also obligatory for students to participate in language development programs that IBS has managed such as daily and weekly activity programs. In daily activity program, students are required to memorize new English vocabularies every day. Also, in weekly activity program, students have to take part in, for example, speech practice or *muhadharah* and conversation practice or *muhawarah*(Fakhruddin& Megawati, 2018; Wekke& Hamid, 2012). For example, *Al-Aqsa* Islamic Boarding School in the city of Sumedang, East Java has administered the so-called 'Morning Vocabulary' in which students are demanded to memorize 15 new vocabularies. It has also conducted 'Morning

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Conversation' every Wednesday and 'Speech Practice' every Saturday night (Nurjaman, 2013). Since these programs are obligatory, punishment is given to those who do not participate in the programs.

However, the use of punishment was criticized by some scholars, especially when it takes shape in corporal or physical punishment. For example, Cheruvalath and Tripathi (2015) investigating teachers' perception of corporal punishment in India found that the use of corporal punishment indicates the lack of teachers' understanding on their students' behaviour, inadequacy in practicing what teachers gained in training programs. Moreover, imposing punishment exacerbates the externalizing behaviour of adolescents (Ma, Han, Kaylor, Delva, & Castillo, 2012). Therefore, such punishment should be avoided especially when it is used to educate students.

Despite this, punishment imposed in IBS is different from corporal punishment that some scholars criticized. Instead, IBS avoids giving physical punishment. For example, in the case of *Ta'mirul Islam* Islamic Boarding School, one of modern IBS in Indonesia, the punishment imposed to the students is educative for the students (Risdianto, 2016). In my personal experience as one of IBS students in the Islamic Boarding School of *Nurul Islam* in East Java Indonesia from 2005 to 2011, the punishment included memorizing new vocabularies, writing a 150-word-essay or giving English speech before audience. Therefore, critics on the use of corporal punishment when it comes to learning and teaching process in IBS is inaccurate. Moreover, a recent study by Stanley (2014) in secondary schools in Lagos by using cross sectional survey revealed that school discipline positively enhanced students' academic performance.

In addition, the use of punishment is also effective in fostering students' extrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation is defined as performing or avoiding activities due to incentives (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Kuvaas, Buch, Weibel, Dysvik, & Nerstad, 2017, p. 245). In the context of IBS, for example, punishment given to the students will always motivate students to speak English. Interview with one of IBS teachers in *Al-Amanah* Islamic Boarding School revealed it:

"Language regulation must become such habit for students. We obligate our students to use both Arabic or English in daily live. There are some days when they are allowed to use Javanese, but at most they must use Arabic and English as medium of communication. And in case that they are caught using non-Arabic or English, they will be punished according to our internal regulation. Therefore, they will feel responsible to use official language in our environment" (Fakhruddin & Megawati, 2018, p. 60).

Such external stimuli are in line with IBS students' intrinsic motivation. It is assumed that students' intrinsic motivation can internally empowers students to improve their speaking skills. Intrinsic motivation refers to doing activities due to own desire without considering any external factors (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Kuvaas et al., 2017). A quantitative descriptive research using a small-scale survey which takes place in one of Indonesia IBS namely *Al-Amanah Islamic Boarding School* shows that students' highest motivation regardless of their gender in learning foreign language is high.

IBS students' highest motivation in learning English respectively lies on the desire to increase and develop their knowledge about English (45% male and 40% female), pursuing overseas scholarship (23% male and 32% female), and having ability to communicate with foreigners (19% male and 20% female) (Fakhruddin & Megawati, 2018, p. 53-54). The high percentage of students' motivation here can be interpreted that the will of learning foreign language is already gained by students. It is not surprising since the perception of urgency of learning English is already high among the students. For example, a majority of IBS students in *Al-Amanah* Islamic Boarding School is interested in learning English. A survey shows that

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respectively 68.18 of male students and 88 percent of female students believe that English is 'very important'. Learning interest is important in motivating students to have better achievement. According to Hidi and Harackiewicz (2000), many scholars on individual interest show that learners who have more interest in particular activities are able to learn and engage more as well as persevere in much longer period of time in the activities.

However, according to Deci, Koestner and Ryan (1999), since extrinsic motivation controls people behaviours through giving external stimuli such as incentive, reward and punishment, it is claimed that extrinsic motivation can undermine intrinsic motivation. In other words, punishment given to the students will undermine their motivation in learning English; therefore, they become dependent to the punishment and will only learn due to punishment. Nevertheless, the more recent study disputed that claim. For example, more recent study by Hidi and Harackiewicz (2000) showed that, intrinsic motivation if combined with extrinsic motivation when it comes to activities which are complex and take a long duration of time results in positive implication. Instead of undermining students' intrinsic motivation, combination of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is able to improve students' academic achievements.

To conclude, as part of the IBS-behaviour modifications, punishment is effective to reinforce students to speak English. Furthermore, it gives students external stimuli that motivate them to always communicate in English. Students who have already perceived their intrinsic motivation if combined with extrinsic motivation will improve students' academic achievement, or in the case English-speaking skills. The question that remains is what skills in speaking can be improved by IBS-applied behaviour modification. The following paragraphs will discuss it.

### *Understanding Skills in Speaking*

IBS-applied behaviour modification is effective in improving students' speaking skills. Punishment as part of IBS-applied behaviour modification enables students to improve their fluency, accuracy and complexity in speaking.

Skills in speaking are not just abilities to create English words orally. Instead, they are complex, involving a number of necessary capacities. Skehan (2009) pointed out three components in speaking; complexity, fluency and accuracy. The classification of these three skills stems from the distinction among each activity. According to Housen and Kuiken (2009), fluency has much to do with spontaneous response in the use of English speaking while accuracy focuses on grammar correctness. In contrast, complexity more emphasize on elaboration and variation of the language. Of the three categories, complexity is the most complex because it involves patterns, structures, syntax, phonology, lexis and morphology. Accordingly, to acquire complexity and accuracy in speaking is to sacrifice fluency since learners must focus on monitor output of their speaking which, in turn, decreases fluency. In other words, each skill competes one another.

This is also confirmed by Dormer (2013) when exploring Indonesian students' English competence. It is found that students who have mastered one speaking skill are not necessarily good at other skills. Likewise, students can speak fluently and without hesitation but still have problems with accuracy and complexity such as incorrect use of preposition, singular and plural nouns as well as pronouns.

### *Improving Fluency, Accuracy and Complexity*

Students acquire their fluency, accuracy and complexity in speaking through IBS-behaviour modification. IBS gives opportunity to students, besides speaking English in doing all of their activities, to practise their speaking skills. For example, IBS designs a program

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called ‘Morning Conversation’ which is held every Wednesday morning, which is obligatory, and punishment is imposed to those who missed the program. Likewise, speech practice is held every Saturday in which students are asked to give speech in front of others (Nurjaman, 2013). This program allows students to acquire their speaking accuracy and complexity as well since they also receive feedback from others.

Correction from peers, teachers and self-correction have benefits for students’ improvement in speaking accuracy and complexity. A study by McCormick and Vercellotti (2013) on self-correction in speaking accuracy through the use of Recorded Speaking Activity (RSA) in Pennsylvania shows that there is a significant correlation between students’ self-correction and the change in errors in their immediate re-speech. Students who notice their grammar errors in their first speaking can have improvement in their language accuracy when they are asked to re-speak. Accordingly, it is found that students who have better English-speaking accuracy in the classrooms have implemented more self-correction in their speaking.

However, it is important that students receive feedback from those who have better quality in English. Instead of improving English-speaking skills, speaking practice conducted with those who are not good language models may result in habituated errors. Dormer (2013) claimed that Speaking errors may come from who learners speak English with. Accordingly, students who speak English with incompetent speakers may share errors in common. Above all, IBS in Indonesia has a supporting environment in improving students’ speaking skills, given that Indonesia is a non-English speaking country. In other countries such as China, for example, students do not have sufficient opportunity outside classrooms to practise what they have learned in schools. Most of them still focus on studying vocabularies and grammar rules (Sun, Lin, You, Shen, Qi & Luo, 2017). From all the above, IBS by implementing a behaviour modification strategy has given opportunities to the students in improving their speaking skills.

## CONCLUSION

ELT strategy which has been implemented in IBS context can be classified as a behaviour modification strategy. IBS-applied behaviour modification has emphasised more on the use of punishment especially to those who are found not to speak English nor take part in language development programs. However, the punishment imposed to the students is educative and motivational. Behaviour modification is able to encourage students to communicate in English in their daily activities since it becomes external stimuli that force students to do so. By making use of behaviour modification, students are able to acquire three skills in speaking (accuracy, complexity and fluency).

## RECOMMENDATION

This paper proposes a number of implications for scholars and related parties which include in English language teaching in IBS. For researchers, this paper fills the gap among studies on behaviour modification. It also contributes to provide a new contextualized terminology to academic discourses on ELT in IBS context that other researchers may refer to when conducting further research. For stakeholders in IBS (i.e., teachers, head and members of language department), this study can be an academic evidence to prove the effectiveness of behaviour modification in improving students speaking skills. Therefore, it can be used as one of the academic references to justify and to some extent maintain the implementation of such strategy. For students, it is important to notice that even though IBS-applied behaviour modification may feel compelling, it is one of effective strategies in improving skills in speaking. Therefore, students should positively engage in the strategy.

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