



## Students' Strategies in Learning English

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### Abstract

English is an international language that is essential to master, especially in terms of speaking skills. However, many students still face limited vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties, and a lack of confidence. This study, conducted in Aceh Barat Daya, Indonesia, explores students' strategies for improving their English-speaking proficiency using a qualitative case study approach. A total of 9 junior high school students (ages 13–15) from three schools were selected through purposive sampling based on their English proficiency, participation in academic activities, and additional learning experiences. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and documentation. The findings indicate that students employ a range of strategies to enhance their speaking skills, with learning and practice strategies being the most prevalent. The strategies employed include direct strategies (reading, looking for pronunciation, practicing, listening, and using English applications) and indirect strategies (using social media, structured lessons, self-directed learning, making friends with foreigners, and asking teachers and peers). The study recommends that teachers integrate these varied strategies into classroom instruction and promote technology-assisted speaking practice to better support students' development.

**Keywords:** Students' strategies; difficulty; learning; English

### Introduction

English is widely recognized as an international language that provides access to global knowledge, technology, and culture. Mastery of English, particularly speaking skills, is an essential asset in facing globalization and international competition. In Indonesia, English is taught as a compulsory subject from junior high school to university level. However, the effectiveness of English education remains a challenge, especially in terms of oral communication. Many Indonesian students struggle to speak English fluently and confidently. Several key factors hinder speaking skills, including limited vocabulary, inaccurate pronunciation, and

a lack of opportunities for active speaking practice both inside and outside the classroom. In addition, affective factors such as shyness, fear of making mistakes, and anxiety when speaking also influence students' ability to use English orally.

To overcome these challenges, appropriate and targeted learning strategies are required. Speaking strategies can help students build confidence and develop their communicative competence. According to Mufidah (2017), speaking strategies can be categorized into direct strategies—such as memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies—and indirect strategies, including metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Agustia (2022) also adds that strategies such as thinking in English, using nonverbal cues, and negotiating meaning can support more fluent spoken communication.

Learning strategies are methods or approaches that students use to understand and master English. The use of appropriate strategies can help students overcome challenges in learning, such as difficulties in pronunciation, understanding grammar, and listening skills. Moreover, effective learning strategies can increase student motivation, making them more engaged in the learning process and helping them achieve higher academic goals. Effective learning strategies significantly influence students' learning outcomes. Students who use approaches that match their needs tend to be more successful in understanding grammar, expanding vocabulary, and improving their speaking and listening skills. The goal of learning strategies is to provide guidelines for teaching and learning activities, allowing students to gain innovative learning experiences related to knowledge and logical thinking skills. Anum S Apriyanto (2019) states that learning strategies refer to characteristics that can motivate students to become more skilled language learners. Strategies are specific methods used by learners to study or enhance their language abilities. Wael et al., (2018) add that learning strategies encompass behaviors and thoughts used during the learning process to influence how students learn.

To succeed in speaking English, students need to master a variety of strategies that can help them overcome difficulties in speaking, both inside and outside the classroom. According to Agustia (2022) several strategies can be applied to English speaking, including social-affective strategies that involve affective factors in a social context, fluency-oriented strategies that emphasize smooth communication, meaning-negotiation strategies aimed at understanding the conversation partner, accuracy-oriented strategies to achieve precision, as well as message reduction and alteration strategies to avoid communication disruptions. Additionally, there are nonverbal strategies, such as gestures and facial expressions, and message abandonment strategies to ignore communication when necessary. Lastly, thinking-in-English strategies require students to try to think in the second language (L2) during conversations.

According to Mufidah (2017), English-speaking learning strategies are divided into two categories: direct and indirect learning strategies. Direct learning

strategies include memory strategies for remembering and using vocabulary, cognitive strategies for understanding grammar, and compensation strategies to adjust conversation topics through synonyms or gestures. Indirect strategies include metacognitive strategies, such as asking for corrections and focusing on listening, affective strategies that involve learning through songs and music, and social strategies that rely on discussion or collaboration with friends or teachers.

Technological developments have also enriched students' speaking strategies. Online platforms, interactive videos, and artificial intelligence (AI)-based applications are now widely used to provide more flexible and personalized speaking practice. AI tools such as chatbots allow students to simulate conversations in real-life situations and offer instant feedback on pronunciation or sentence structure errors. According to Suciati et al., (2023) most students recognize the benefits of using AI in speaking learning, although some challenges remain, such as the lack of social interaction and reliance on technology.

Speaking strategies are also influenced by cultural background and educational systems in each country. Loh S Teo (2017) state that students in Asian countries, including Indonesia, tend to focus more on grammar and exam preparation, while students in English-speaking countries such as the United States place greater emphasis on conversation practice and the use of English in everyday life. The role of teachers also differs: in Asia, teachers often serve as the primary source of instruction, whereas in America, teachers act more as facilitators who encourage independent learning.

Students living in countries where English is spoken naturally have different learning strategies compared to students in countries where English is not used as a daily language, especially in the case of America and Asia. According to Loh S Teo (2017) the differences in English learning strategies between Asian and American students reflect unique cultural influences and educational methods in each region. In Asia, English learning often focuses on tests and grammar. This is evident in strategies geared towards exam preparation, such as for TOEFL or IELTS, as well as memorizing grammar rules aimed at academic success. In contrast, in America, the learning approach tends to be more practical, with a focus on oral communication skills through conversations and interactive activities.

Moreover, teachers in Asia often play a dominant role as instructors who deliver material in a more directive manner, whereas in America, teachers act more as facilitators who encourage students to learn independently. This difference is supported by studies showing that American students are more frequently involved in open discussions, while Asian students generally experience a more structured learning environment. The use of technology also differs; in Asian countries with more limited access to technology, students are less likely to use AI applications or interactive media. On the other hand, American students frequently use AI-based tools and digital platforms for flexible, needs-based independent learning.

English language learning at the junior high school level plays a crucial role in equipping students with the communication skills necessary in the era of

globalization (Alfarisy, 2021). English language learning in junior high school not only focuses on grammar and vocabulary but also on speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills. These skills are essential for daily communication and social interaction. Additionally, English proficiency is often required for continuing education at higher levels. Many educational institutions use English as the medium of instruction. Mastery of English also facilitates ongoing learning processes and acquiring new skills relevant to the future. Thus, proficiency in English at the junior high school level becomes a crucial foundation for students to continue their education and face future professional challenges.

SMP Negeri Tunas Nusa, SMPIT Insan Madani, and SMPIT Rabbani Quran School are among the schools in Aceh Barat Daya that implement English language lessons. These three schools are well-known in the community, especially among the people of Aceh Barat Daya. They are considered favorite schools, making them the top choice for entering junior high school. Each of these schools has different methods of teaching English. In these schools, some students are categorized as quite capable in English and have achieved various accolades in English. Therefore, the research question employed in this study is: What are students' learning strategies in speaking English?

## Method

This study is qualitative research using a case study approach. According to Arif (2024), a case study is a qualitative method that aims to investigate and understand a specific case in-depth within a real-life context. This method is suitable for gaining a comprehensive understanding of students' strategies in learning English speaking skills. Participants in this study consisted of 9 junior high school students aged 13–15 years, selected from three schools in Aceh Barat Daya: SMP Negeri Tunas Nusa, SMPIT Insan Madani, and SMPIT Rabbani Quran School. The selection used purposive sampling with criteria: (1) students with high English proficiency (score  $\geq 90$ ), (2) active participation in English-related activities such as English clubs, debates, or exchange programs, and (3) prior experience in learning English through institutions or courses outside school. Most participants came from middle socioeconomic backgrounds with varied exposure to technology and extracurricular support.

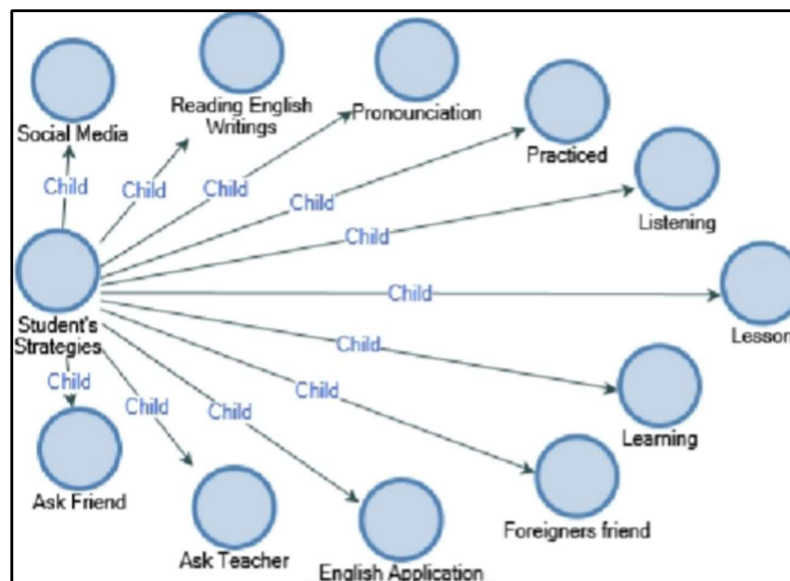
Data were collected through two methods: in-depth interviews and documentation. The interviews were semi-structured, consisting of 13 main questions focusing on students' learning strategies, motivations, and challenges. Interviews were conducted in English to ensure clarity, held in a quiet classroom setting, and each lasted between 20–30 minutes. Each session was audio-recorded with prior consent and later transcribed for analysis.

Data analysis followed several stages: (1) transcribing interview recordings, (2) coding and categorizing responses into themes using NVIVO software, and (3) interpreting patterns of strategy usage. The coding was guided by Oxford's

taxonomy of language learning strategies (direct and indirect). To strengthen the credibility of findings, the researcher employed member checking by confirming summaries of interview responses with each participant. In addition, peer debriefing with fellow researchers was conducted to reduce bias in interpretation. The decision to select 9 students was based on the principle of data saturation—after interviewing 3 students from each school, recurring themes emerged consistently, indicating no significant new information would be obtained from additional participants. Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the research process. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants and their guardians before data collection. Permission to conduct research was also secured from the school principals. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by using pseudonyms and ensuring that identifiable information was not disclosed.

## Results

The results of this study can be seen in the following image.



From Picture 1, it can be seen that students use a variety of strategies to speak English, with the most common responses being *learning* and *practicing*, each chosen by 14.28% (2 responses). Other strategies, such as listening to conversations, actively speaking, asking teachers, using English learning apps, asking friends, learning from social media, having foreign friends, reading English texts, and checking pronunciation, were each selected by 7.14% (1 response). These findings indicate that although students employ different approaches in their learning process, learning and active practice remain the dominant strategies in improving their English-speaking skills comprehensively.

Wael et al., (2018) categorizes learning strategies into two main types: direct and indirect strategies. Direct strategies are those that directly involve the use of the language itself. These include memory strategies, such as memorizing

vocabulary with flashcards, grouping words into specific categories, or using imagination to remember meanings. Cognitive strategies involve activities such as reading English articles, writing a daily journal, watching movies without subtitles, taking notes of important sentences, and translating texts. Compensation strategies are used when learners face gaps in their language knowledge, such as guessing word meanings from context, using gestures when forgetting vocabulary, or replacing unknown words with synonyms or simpler explanations.

On the other hand, indirect strategies do not directly involve language use but significantly support the overall learning process. These include metacognitive strategies (e.g., creating study schedules, setting learning goals, and evaluating progress), affective strategies (e.g., managing emotions, calming oneself before an exam, and staying motivated), and social strategies (e.g., asking teachers or friends, joining language communities, and practicing with native speakers).

In this study, data revealed that students employed various strategies categorized into direct and indirect types. Learning and practicing were the most frequently used strategies, followed by asking peers or teachers and using digital tools. A total of 11 distinct strategies were identified through a coding process using NVIVO software. Students' responses were categorized based on thematic keywords such as "practice," "translate," "ask," "application," "gesture," and so on. Each interview transcript was analyzed line by line to extract indicators of strategies, and patterns consistently emerging across participants formed the final categories.

Table 1. Students' Learning Strategies

Learning Strategies	Direct	Indirect
Social Media		√
Reading English Writing	√	
Looking for Pronunciation	√	
Practiced	√	
Listening	√	
Lesson		√
Learning		√
Foreigners friend		√
English Application	√	
Ask Teacher		√
Ask Friend		√

#### Direct Strategies

Based on the interview results, it was found that some students used the strategies of reading English writing, practiced, and listening. The strategy of reading English writing involves direct interaction between students and English texts, whether in the form of books, articles, essays, or other written materials. In this process, students not only read but also strive to understand and analyze

sentence structures, grammar, and writing styles used. Reading English texts helps expand vocabulary and deepen understanding of sentence structure and proper grammar usage. According to Nunan S Carter (2015), reading English writing can help students improve their reading and writing skills more effectively. Following the students' statements:

...try to read English writings (Student 8)

In addition to reading, students also apply the strategy of practicing speaking to enhance their English language skills. This strategy requires students to actively use English, both in spoken and written communication. Through continuous practice, students can improve their fluency in speaking and gain a better understanding of proper grammar usage. Holidazia S Rodliyah (2020), stated that practicing plays a crucial role in vocabulary acquisition. Students can implement this strategy by speaking English with friends or teachers, writing journals or essays, and participating in discussions within English-speaking communities. This aligns with the research conducted by Hidayat S Ariani (2021), which stated that high-achieving learners tend to use various language learning strategies, including practice and reading English texts, to improve their language proficiency. Following the students' statements:

Practice my English (Student 4)

Another strategy used by students is listening to English materials such as conversations. By listening to various English sources, students can understand accents, intonation, and sentence patterns used by native speakers. Baharuddin et al., (2023) emphasized that listening skills are a fundamental aspect of language learning. Through regular exposure to English conversations or news programs, students can better comprehend communication contexts, expressions, and more natural language usage. Following the students' statements:

...Listening to conversations in English, actively talking with friends  
(Student 1)

In addition, students also use the strategy of finding the correct pronunciation to improve their speaking skills. This strategy involves searching for information on the correct pronunciation of words or phrases through various media, such as online dictionaries, video tutorials, or language learning applications. Following the students' statements:

Usually, look at the letters of the pronunciation (Student 9).

Fitriani et al., (2022) stated that understanding the correct pronunciation can

boost students' confidence in speaking and help them avoid communication errors caused by incorrect pronunciation. Students can practice pronunciation by listening to and imitating native speakers, using learning applications that provide feedback on pronunciation, or recording their speech for self-evaluation.

#### Indirect Strategies

Based on the interview results, it was found that some students used strategies such as Social Media, such as Instagram and TikTok. Social media is used as a tool to enhance English language skills. Students can follow English-language accounts, access educational content, read articles, watch videos, or interact with native speakers through comments and messages. According to Natalia et al., (2024) social media provides broad access to various learning resources that can indirectly improve English proficiency. Other strategies such as Foreigners Friend, Lesson, Learning, Ask Teacher, Ask Friend and English Application such as Google Translate and Duolingo. In addition, students also use English language applications to assist them in learning to speak English. It cannot be denied that students are now very familiar with technology, making speaking practice easier. This aligns with Wael et al., (2018) who stated that students use auditory and visual connections to obtain information that helps them remember vocabulary, making it easier to learn to speak. Following the students' statements:

I also download English language applications on my phone, such as Google Translate and Duolingo (Student 2) and make friends with foreigners through Instagram and Tiktok (Student 6).

Another strategy is learning. Various methods are used in the learning process, such as self-study, tutoring, and other approaches. The overall learning process includes independent exploration and regular practice in understanding English. This strategy focuses more on planning, monitoring, and evaluating the learning process. Additionally, participating in structured English lessons—whether through books, courses, or video tutorials—helps students grasp grammar, vocabulary, and other language skills. Holidazia S Rodliyah (2020) emphasize that students often use metacognitive strategies to enhance their vocabulary mastery. These strategies involve planning, monitoring, and evaluating the learning process, highlighting the importance of self-directed learning and practice in language acquisition. Following the students' statements:

Learning new vocabulary... (Student 1), Every night there are lessons (Student 2), and Start learning... (Student 8).

In addition, students also use the ask teacher and ask friend strategies. Asking the teacher when facing difficulties in learning English is an important strategy for improving material comprehension. Wardana et al., (2025) emphasized that teachers act as facilitators who help students understand complex language concepts through guidance and constructive feedback. Moreover, discussing and



asking friends who are more proficient in English is another way to grasp difficult concepts. Wardana et al., (2025) also stated that peer interaction in language learning can enhance understanding through discussion and collaboration. Following the students' statements:

Usually, I ask for help from the teacher" (Student 2), another student: "Ask a friend what the correct word is and then say it again" (Student 5).

The strategies of social media, lesson, learning, foreigners' friend, English application, ask teacher, and ask friend are categorized as indirect strategies because they support learning without directly involving language production in real communication. These strategies help students understand English through various methods, such as language exposure, guidance from teachers and peers, and the use of technology and learning media. By effectively utilizing these strategies, students can develop their English skills more optimally before applying them in active communication.

Based on the interview results, it can be concluded that the most effective strategies in general are using simple sentences, using synonyms when forgetting vocabulary, asking for help from friends or teachers, using gestures and facial expressions, and practicing consistently. Overall, students combined traditional and modern methods, utilizing resources from both their academic environment and digital platforms. The integration of social support, technology, and personal effort created a diverse and dynamic approach to improving English-speaking skills.

## **Discussion**

Students in this study adopted various strategies, both direct and indirect, to support their English-speaking development. Many students preferred practicing and using simple sentences because it helped them overcome anxiety and build confidence when speaking. This is consistent with affective factors identified in Agustia (2022) which emphasized that speaking strategies should reduce emotional barriers such as fear and nervousness.

Students also selected strategies based on accessibility and familiarity. For instance, the use of Google Translate and Duolingo was prevalent among students who had access to smartphones and the internet. This shows that technological convenience plays a major role in shaping learning behavior. Similarly, students with strong social networks tended to ask peers or teachers for clarification, emphasizing the influence of interpersonal relationships on strategy selection. Students who use language learning applications such as Duolingo and Google Translate benefit from immediate feedback, pronunciation models, and interactive exercises that simulate real-life conversation. These platforms also allow students to learn autonomously and at their own pace. Moreover, social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram expose students to authentic English usage through captions, comments, and videos, which helps improve listening

comprehension and vocabulary acquisition in informal contexts. However, the reliance on technology also brings challenges, such as dependence on translation tools and a lack of human interaction, which may hinder the development of spontaneous speaking skills.

A significant cultural factor influencing strategy choice is the Indonesian education system, which often emphasizes grammar and structured learning. As noted by Loh S Teo (2017), Asian students, including Indonesians, tend to focus more on form and accuracy than communicative fluency. This was evident in students who translated from Indonesian before speaking or focused on pronunciation correctness. Furthermore, the role of teachers as authoritative figures in Indonesian classrooms may explain why many students still rely heavily on teacher support rather than independent exploration. While most literature promotes social strategies (e.g., peer discussion) as effective, some students in this study expressed discomfort when practicing with friends due to fear of judgment. This highlights that not all strategies fit every learner equally and that emotional readiness is crucial in choosing effective strategies.

Comparing these findings with prior studies, such as those by Fadilla et al. (2021) and Suciati et al. (2023), confirms the growing reliance on technology, especially AI-based tools, in developing speaking proficiency. However, some students in this study admitted that despite using technology, they still struggled with fluency. This contrasts with Suciati et al.'s (2023) claim that AI significantly enhances speaking skills, suggesting that the effectiveness of AI may depend on usage frequency, feedback mechanisms, or individual learning preferences.

From a practical standpoint, this research provides several implications for educators and curriculum developers. Teachers should diversify instructional methods by integrating both cognitive strategies (e.g., translation, repetition) and affective support (e.g., self-confidence building, error tolerance). Teachers are also encouraged to introduce students to digital tools and guide them in using them effectively.

Therefore, teachers should carefully balance the integration of AI with traditional approaches, ensuring students not only consume digital content but also practice producing language in meaningful ways. Curriculum developers should incorporate technology-enhanced language learning tasks while promoting digital literacy and critical thinking. Furthermore, promoting metacognitive awareness—teaching students to evaluate and choose their own strategies—can help create more autonomous and effective learners.

## Conclusion

This study shows that students use various strategies in learning English, particularly in improving their speaking skills. Based on the interview results, students' learning strategies can be categorized into direct strategies and indirect strategies. Direct strategies include reading English writing, looking for

pronunciation, practicing, and listening, which involve direct interaction with English through reading, searching for correct pronunciation, practicing speaking or writing, and listening to English materials. Meanwhile, indirect strategies include social media, lessons, learning, foreign friends, English applications, asking a teacher, and asking a friend, which support language learning without direct language production. The findings of this study confirm that using a combination of appropriate learning strategies can help students overcome difficulties in speaking English. Therefore, teachers and educators are encouraged to accommodate these various strategies to make learning more effective and aligned with students' needs.

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