



Strategies for Developing Arabic Speaking Skills (*Maharah Kalam*) at Private Islamic Senior High School: A Descriptive Qualitative Study

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Article Info	Abstract
<p>Received: 2026-05-22 Revised: 2026-06-09 Accepted: 2026-06-10</p> <p>Keywords: Arabic language learning strategies; speaking skills; maharah kalam; language environment; bi'ah lughawiyah; Islamic education.</p> <p>DOI: 10.24256/ideasv14i1.10815</p> <p>Corresponding Author: Erka Pulungan erkapulungan@gmail.com Master of Arabic Language Education Study Program, Sultan Syarif Kasim State Islamic University Riau</p>	<p><i>Arabic speaking proficiency (maharah kalam) remains a central challenge in Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia. While communicative strategies have been widely discussed theoretically, few studies have examined their systematic implementation in specific madrasah contexts. This study investigates the strategies employed in the Arabic language learning programme at Private Islamic Senior High School Medan to develop students' maharah kalam, with particular attention to the role of the language environment (bi'ah lughawiyah). Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through classroom observations, interviews with Arabic teachers and students, and documentation analysis. Findings reveal that the key strategies implemented include muhadasah (conversation) practice, daily vocabulary provision, dialogue and role-play exercises, and the creation of an Arabic-immersive school environment. The language environment (bi'ah lughawiyah) emerged as the most influential factor in improving speaking fluency, as it provided students with continuous communicative practice beyond formal classroom instruction. Supporting factors included teacher creativity and extracurricular language activities, while the main inhibiting factors were limited student vocabulary and low self-confidence. The study concludes that communicative, practice-oriented strategies embedded within an active language environment are effective in gradually improving maharah kalam. These findings contribute practical insights for Arabic language educators and Islamic educational institutions aiming to design more effective speaking-focused learning programmes.</i></p>

1. Introduction

Arabic occupies a uniquely important position in Islamic education, functioning not only as a medium of communication but also as the key to accessing foundational religious sources including the Qur'an and Hadith (Arsyad, 2010). In Indonesia, Arabic is taught formally at madrasah levels under the auspices of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, which has designed specific Arabic language curricula for Madrasah Aliyah (MA) to strengthen students' religious competence and global literacy (Hasan, 2018; Zainuddin, 2019). Despite its recognised importance, Arabic language learning in many Indonesian madrasahs continues to face persistent challenges, including low student motivation, teacher reliance on conventional lecture-based methods, and limited access to contextual learning resources (Hermawan, 2011).

A particularly pressing challenge is the development of speaking skills (*maharah kalam*), which requires sustained communicative practice beyond passive classroom learning. According to Ahmad Fuad Effendy, *maharah kalam* is defined as the ability to articulate sounds or words to express thoughts, ideas, and feelings orally, and it cannot be developed optimally through theoretical instruction alone (Effendy, 2017). This suggests the need for learning environments and strategies that actively engage students in real communicative practice.

While previous research has examined Arabic learning strategies broadly including the use of communicative approaches (Richards & Rodgers, 2001), audiovisual media (Yusuf, 2017), and project-based learning (Mulyani, 2019) limited empirical attention has been paid to how specific Islamic schools systematically integrate multiple strategies, including language environment creation, within their daily programmes. The unique combination of structured academic planning and immersive language practices at Private Islamic Senior High School Medan provides a valuable case for such investigation.

Private Islamic Senior High School has implemented a comprehensive Arabic language programme that integrates communicative strategies with a deliberately constructed language environment (*bi'ah lughawiyah*). Understanding how this programme is implemented, what supports or hinders its effectiveness, and how it impacts graduate quality fills a meaningful gap in the literature on contextualised Arabic language pedagogy in Indonesian Islamic schools.

Accordingly, this study addresses three research questions: (1) What strategies does Private Islamic Senior High School employ to ensure that Arabic language learning remains engaging for students? (2) Why is the language environment (*bi'ah lughawiyah*) given particular emphasis in the school's teaching approach? (3) What impact has the structured programme had on students' Arabic speaking competence?

2. Literature Review

Learning Strategies in Arabic Language Education

A learning strategy is defined as an action plan designed to achieve learning objectives effectively and efficiently (Uno, 2012). In Arabic language education, strategies must address all four language skills listening (*istima'*), speaking (*kalam*), reading (*qira'ah*), and writing (*kitabah*) in an integrated manner (Effendy, 2009; Hermawan, 2014). Hamruni (2012) further describes a learning strategy as encompassing the use of methods and utilisation of resources within an educational plan. Effective strategies must create a communicative and active learning environment that moves beyond rote learning and grammar-focused instruction.

Research highlights several effective approaches: the communicative approach, which prioritises real-life language use over structural memorisation (Richards & Rodgers, 2001); the direct method, which builds fluency through immersive Arabic use (Nuha, 2016); and technology-integrated instruction, including audiovisual media (Yusuf, 2017) and online learning applications (Fauzi, 2020). Project-based learning has also demonstrated effectiveness in developing active Arabic language competence (Mulyani, 2019). However, these strategies are most impactful when embedded within a supportive learning environment.

Maharah Kalam and the Communicative Approach

Maharah kalam refers to the ability to convey ideas, thoughts and feelings through spoken language in a correct and communicative manner (Hermawan, 2014). Effendy (2017) argues that this skill cannot develop fully without opportunities for real communicative practice in authentic situations. The communicative approach, as described by Richards and Rodgers (2001), places emphasis on the active use of language in meaningful contexts rather than on structural analysis. This approach has been widely advocated for Arabic instruction because it mirrors the natural process of language acquisition and builds the confidence needed for spontaneous communication.

Techniques associated with this approach such as *muhadasah* (guided conversation), role-play, dialogue exercises, and vocabulary-building activities provide structured yet communicative practice opportunities. Consistent with Effendy's (2017) and Hermawan's (2014) positions, these techniques help students develop pronunciation accuracy, sentence construction fluency, and communicative confidence.

Language Environment (Bi'ah Lughawiyah)

The concept of *bi'ah lughawiyah* (language environment) holds that sustained exposure to a target language in everyday contexts accelerates acquisition by making communicative practice a natural part of daily life (Hamid, 2010). Abdul Hamid explains that an active language environment enhances students' language

skills by providing direct experience in communicative practice, which develops pronunciation, vocabulary, and speaking fluency organically. Programmes such as *Arabic Day* and *Arabic Week*, along with institutional rules mandating Arabic use within school grounds, are practical manifestations of *bi'ah lughawiyah* that have shown positive results in Islamic educational settings.

Motivation and Its Role in Arabic Language Learning

Motivation is widely recognised as a key determinant of language learning success (Sardiman, 2018). According to Sardiman, learning motivation encompasses the totality of internal driving forces that initiate, sustain, and direct learning activities. In Arabic language learning, motivation is closely linked to the communicativeness and interactivity of the learning environment. Studies indicate that when students experience active participation in language use through games, dialogues, and real conversational contexts their intrinsic motivation and confidence to use the language increase significantly (Effendy, 2017). Teachers also play a vital role by adopting creative, encouraging pedagogical approaches that reduce the anxiety often associated with speaking a foreign language (Hermawan, 2014).

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive research design (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This approach was appropriate for describing in depth the Arabic language learning programme strategies at MAS Plus Al-Ulum, with a focus on *maharah kalam* development.

Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure informational richness. The study involved three Arabic language teachers at MAS Plus Al-Ulum who were directly responsible for the Arabic language programme, and twelve students from Grade XI who had been enrolled in the programme for at least one academic year. The teachers had a minimum of five years of Arabic teaching experience at the madrasah level. Students were selected to represent a range of speaking proficiency levels.

Data Collection

Data were collected through three methods over a four-week period. First, non-participant classroom observations (six sessions of approximately 90 minutes each) were conducted to document the implementation of learning strategies and classroom interaction patterns. An observation guide was developed based on indicators derived from the communicative approach literature, including frequency of student-to-student communication, use of Arabic outside structured tasks, and teacher facilitation techniques. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with all three teachers and in small groups with students

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(three groups of four students each). Interview questions focused on strategy implementation, perceived effectiveness, and experienced challenges. Interviews were conducted in Indonesian, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Third, documentation including lesson plans (RPP), activity schedules, programme guidelines, and photographs was collected to triangulate observational and interview data.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using Miles and Huberman's (1994) interactive model, comprising three stages: data reduction (selecting and focusing relevant data), data display (organising data into thematic categories), and conclusion drawing and verification. Themes were derived inductively from the data and cross-checked with theoretical frameworks. To enhance trustworthiness, member checking was conducted by sharing initial findings with teacher participants for verification, and data triangulation was achieved by comparing findings across observation, interview, and documentary sources. Researcher reflexivity was maintained throughout the study through the use of reflective field notes.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to data collection, written permission was obtained from the school principal and all participants. Informed consent was secured from teachers and, for student participants, from both students and their guardians. Participants were assured of confidentiality; pseudonyms and participant codes were used in reporting. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

3. Result

Strategy 1: *Muhadasah (Arabic Conversation) Practice*

The school implements structured *muhadasah* sessions at the start of each school day, involving all students regardless of year level. Classroom observations confirmed that these sessions, lasting approximately 15 minutes, involved students engaging in guided Arabic dialogues on topics ranging from daily greetings to thematic discussions aligned with current lesson content.

Teacher YSF explained: "*The muhadasah activity is not just repetition. Students are given a topic card and must respond to a partner spontaneously. We start simple, then gradually increase the complexity.*" Students interviewed reported that the regularity of *muhadasah* reduced their speaking anxiety over time. Student respondent S3 noted: "*At first I was embarrassed, but now it feels normal to speak Arabic every morning.*" This strategy is consistent with Hermawan's (2014) view that *maharah kalam* must be trained intensively and continuously through direct speaking practice.

Strategy 2: *Daily Vocabulary (Mufradat) Programme*

Teachers provide students with five to ten new Arabic vocabulary items each day, displayed on classroom boards and read aloud collectively at the start of lessons. Students are expected to use the new vocabulary in sentences during *muhadasah* sessions and informal interactions. Observations confirmed consistent use of the vocabulary board across all three observed classes. Teacher YSF stated: *"Vocabulary is the building block of speech. Without it, students cannot construct sentences even when they want to speak."* As their vocabulary expanded, students demonstrated improved ability to construct sentences and express opinions in Arabic during observed sessions. This aligns with Effendy's (2017) finding that vocabulary mastery significantly determines students' communicative effectiveness in Arabic.

Strategy 3: Dialogue and Role-Play Practice

Classroom observations documented the regular use of structured dialogue exercises and role-play scenarios in Arabic lessons. Teachers designed situational scripts (e.g., at the market, introducing oneself, discussing Islamic topics) and assigned roles to students who enacted them in front of peers. Teacher YSF described the rationale: *"Role-play forces students to think in Arabic within a context. They cannot rely on memorised phrases they must adapt."* Students reported that this method increased their confidence because it made language practice feel purposeful rather than mechanical. The interactive and simulative nature of this strategy is consistent with the communicative approach described by Richards and Rodgers (2001), which emphasises language use in real-life contexts.

Strategy 4: Language Environment (Bi'ah Lughawiyah) Creation

The school has institutionalised an Arabic-immersive environment through several mechanisms. First, Arabic is designated as the required language for all formal school interactions between students and teachers during designated hours. Second, the school holds regular *Arabic Day* events in which all school activities from morning assembly to canteen transactions are conducted in Arabic. Third, Arabic expression boards displaying common phrases for greetings, permissions, and requests are positioned throughout the school building.

Observations confirmed widespread use of these expressions, with students spontaneously using Arabic greetings when encountered by the research team. Teacher YSF explained: *"A language environment means Arabic becomes part of the school's culture, not just a subject. Students start to think in Arabic even outside class."* This finding supports Hamid's (2010) assertion that an active *bi'ah lughawiyah* creates a learning atmosphere that naturally supports the improvement of communicative skills.

Supporting Factors

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Three key supporting factors were identified. First, the presence of a consistently maintained *bi'ah lughawiyah* provided students with continuous practice beyond the classroom. Second, teachers' communicative, creative, and motivating pedagogical styles created an enjoyable and low-anxiety learning environment. As student S7 noted: "Our teacher makes learning fun. He uses games and stories, so we forget we are learning." Third, extracurricular language activities including Arabic speech competitions, language clubs, and Islamic studies discussions conducted in Arabic provided additional structured practice opportunities.

Inhibiting Factors

Two primary obstacles were identified. First, students' limited vocabulary was consistently cited as a barrier to spontaneous speaking. Despite the daily vocabulary programme, students reported difficulty retaining new words and constructing extended utterances. Second, a number of students, particularly those from non-Arabic speaking home environments, exhibited low self-confidence in speaking Arabic publicly. Teacher YSF acknowledged: "Some students understand Arabic but freeze when asked to speak. Building confidence takes time and patience." Additionally, the continued dominance of regional languages and Indonesian in students' informal interactions outside school limited the effectiveness of the language.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that MAS Plus Al-Ulum's Arabic language programme successfully integrates multiple communicative strategies within a structured institutional framework, producing measurable improvements in students' *maharah kalam*. The four core strategies *muhadasah*, daily vocabulary, dialogue and role-play, and *bi'ah lughawiyah* operate synergistically: vocabulary provision feeds *muhadasah* practice; *muhadasah* prepares students for role-play; and the language environment reinforces all formal learning in everyday contexts. This integration distinguishes MAS Plus Al-Ulum's approach from programmes that implement isolated communicative techniques without broader environmental support.

The emphasis on *bi'ah lughawiyah* as the overarching environmental strategy is particularly significant. Unlike classroom-bound activities, the language environment permeates the entire school day, creating what Hamid (2010) describes as a naturally communicative atmosphere. This study adds empirical evidence from a specific institutional context to support Hamid's theoretical claim, demonstrating that when Arabic immersion is institutionally mandated and culturally embedded rather than individually practiced students engage more consistently and confidently with the language.

The role-play and dialogue strategies align closely with Richards and Rodgers'

(2001) communicative language teaching principles. However, the current study offers a contextual refinement: the effectiveness of role-play in this setting appeared to depend significantly on its integration with the daily vocabulary programme. Students who had mastered current vocabulary items performed notably more flexibly in role-play scenarios, suggesting that vocabulary-communication integration is a critical design consideration in speaking-focused Arabic programmes.

Regarding challenges, the persistent issue of low student confidence is consistent with findings from broader foreign language education research (Sardiman, 2016). Notably, the school's response gradual exposure through daily *muhadasah* rather than high-pressure public performance appears pedagogically sound. The longitudinal data from student interviews suggest that confidence did increase over time with regular low-stakes practice, which supports an anxiety-reduction approach to speaking instruction.

With respect to graduate quality, interview data from teacher respondents indicated that students who had participated fully in the programme demonstrated Arabic language proficiency in reading religious texts, writing academic compositions, and engaging in formal Arabic conversations. This aligns with Nasution's (2011) argument that systematically designed curricula produce graduates with skills commensurate with societal and academic needs. However, it must be acknowledged that this study did not include formal pre-post assessments of speaking proficiency, which limits the ability to make definitive causal claims regarding programme impact on graduate outcomes. Future research incorporating structured *maharah kalam* assessment instruments would strengthen this evidence base.

A limitation of this study is that data collection was limited to a four-week observation window, which may not capture the full developmental trajectory of students' speaking skills over an academic year. Furthermore, the study was conducted at a single institution, which restricts transferability of findings. Future research could employ a comparative design across multiple Islamic schools to determine which strategy combinations are most effective in diverse institutional contexts.

5. Conclusion

This study investigated the Arabic language learning strategies at MAS Plus Al-Ulum Medan with a focus on the development of students' *maharah kalam* (speaking skills). The findings demonstrate that the school implements four interlocking communicative strategies: *muhadasah* practice, daily vocabulary provision, dialogue and role-play, and *bi'ah lughawiyah* creation. Among these, the language environment (*bi'ah lughawiyah*) emerged as the most influential factor, as it extended communicative practice beyond formal instruction into students' daily school life. Supporting factors included teacher creativity and

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extracurricular language activities, while vocabulary limitations and low self-confidence remained the primary inhibiting factors.

The practical implication of these findings is that the development of *maharah kalam* is most effectively supported when communicative classroom strategies are embedded within a broader institutional language environment. For Arabic language educators and Islamic school administrators, this study suggests that investing in *bi'ah lughawiyah* through institutional Arabic-use policies, daily immersive events, and environmental supports such as Arabic expression boards may yield greater speaking proficiency gains than classroom instruction alone. Future research should incorporate longitudinal speaking assessments and comparative institutional designs to further validate and extend these findings.

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