

Challenges and Strategies of EFL Students from Islamic Boarding School in Musical Drama

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to identify challenges and strategies in preparing an English musical drama performance by Islamic boarding school students as English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Data were collected through interviews, document analysis, and questionnaires. The results of the study indicate that there are linguistic challenges for participants, especially in terms of pronouncing dialogues and script texts that must be read fluently. In addition, students also face non-linguistic challenges outside of the language aspect that can have a significant impact on the preparation process, implementation, and final results of the performance. To overcome language barriers, guidance from educators, tiered exercises, intensive repetition, use of audiovisual references, and directed discussions are provided. Meanwhile, non-linguistic challenges were addressed through psychological support, optimal practice time management, application of a structured practice approach, and the use of video imitation techniques and creativity in adapting to resource limitations. Although there are still limitations, several strategies have proven effective. Overall, this drama performance is not only a medium for learning and showing off the students' learning outcomes, but also a means of instilling Islamic values that are in line with the goals of Islamic boarding school education.

Keywords: *drama; challenges; strategies; EFL; Islamic boarding school*

INTRODUCTION

English language proficiency has become crucial in the era of globalization, not only in academic and professional fields, but also in religious contexts. In modern Islamic boarding schools, English is now part of the curriculum to develop competencies to face future challenges (Fitria, 2023). The learning process has been integrated with Islamic values, as a form of language development and religious education (Farah & Sumarsono, 2025). Therefore, learning English needs to start from an early age so that students are more mature in mastering it (Dariyanto et al., 2022). In the context of Islamic boarding schools, learning English can also open access to English-language Islamic literature, thus facilitating the understanding of Islamic teachings (Fitria, 2023).

In practice, many students still experience difficulties, particularly in verbal communication in English. These difficulties are generally caused by linguistic factors, such as differences between their native language and the target language, and learning environments that do not fully support the development of speaking skills (Amelia & Komariah, 2017; Maheswari et al., 2020; Sofyan et al., 2023). Barriers to English language mastery are also influenced by learning strategies, teaching processes, lack of exposure to language and culture (Hibatullah, 2019). In addition, according to Woodrow (2006) in his study revealed that there are eleven stress triggers that affect EFL students' speaking practice. These factors can be summarized into several main categories, including anxiety about the audience, the interlocutor or listener, and knowledge related to the topic of conversation and language limitations (Woodrow, 2006). All of these elements significantly affect student performance, especially in oral activities in contexts that require high language skills and self-confidence.

To overcome challenges, appropriate learning strategies are needed, knowing that each student has a different learning style (Montero-SaizAja, 2022), and success in learning a language is determined more by learning than talent (Abdelhalim, 2015). Cohen (2014) added that language learning strategies include conscious strategies in understanding language, followed by usage strategies to apply the language that has been learned. Usage strategies include four things: (retrieval) remembering what has been learned, (Practice) practicing language structures, (communication) conveying messages as best as possible and (closing/diversion) getting around limitations to still appear proficient in the language. The implementation of strategies will be more effective if adjusted to each student's learning style, because it can increase motivation, self-confidence, and satisfaction in using a second language (Cohen, 2014).

A relevant approach to the process of developing language skills is drama-based learning. Several previous studies have shown that drama is a constructivist approach that emphasizes collaboration, exploration, and active interaction (Ashton-Hay, 2005). This approach has been proven to motivate EFL students and is effective in improving English language skills and self-confidence, as well as encouraging critical thinking and creativity (Brovchak et al., 2024; Hua et al., 2025; Khasyar & Ratnasari, 2021; Prchlík, 2017). One such integration can be found at the Bumi Kartini Jepara Islamic Boarding School which has an English department and is holding a Language Festival in 2025. One of the main events is a communicative performance in English that combines elements of music and singing, adapted from the Upin & Ipin series (Orosz & Noémi, 2024; Sutanto et al., 2019), as a demonstration of the students' English language skills. Through this activity, students also hone their language skills in expressing meaning artistically.

Although drama-based learning has many benefits, its application in English language teaching still faces practical challenges. Angelianawati (2019) noted that shy students struggle to perform in public, while teachers face challenges in planning, discipline, and providing appropriate correction (Angelianawati, 2019). Rzaeva (2025) added issues such as time constraints, large classes, and a lack of teacher

training. However, these challenges can be overcome through professional training, a supportive classroom environment, and short, structured activities (Rzayeva, 2025).

Previous research has focused more on the problem of drama practice as a language learning tool in formal schools. However, this study examines the challenges and strategies in preparing a musical drama performance as a demonstration of English language skills among EFL students in Islamic boarding schools, focusing on verbal expression from the perspective of the students as the main actors. "Challenges" here refer to obstacles during the preparation process, both linguistic and non-linguistic, that affect the fluency of speaking activities during the preparation process. This study also identifies Islamic values that can be learned from this process. The results of this study provide an overview of the preparation process faced by students and serve as a basis for designing or refining English language learning programs in Islamic boarding schools. Furthermore, the results of this study can be used as a reference in implementing talent shows, as well as a means to develop and evaluate students' abilities through creative performances.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore the challenges and strategies in preparing an English-language musical drama performance by EFL students in a boarding school. In terms of participant selection, a purposive sampling method was used, consisting of eighth-grade students involved as actors and production team members, and teachers as mentors (W.Creswell & N.Poth, 2018). Data was collected through a triangulation method, which included two focus group interviews with students (Akyıldız & Ahmed, 2021), one individual face-to-face interviews and questionnaire (G-Form) as an instrument for confirmation and addition of supporting data (McGuirk & O'Neill, 2016), as well as through document analysis in the form of drama scripts and video recordings of performances.

The data analysis process follows Miles and Huberman's interactive model in stages: data reduction, presentation of findings, and drawing conclusions. After the data collection process is complete, the data is simplified and categorized according to the research focus. The data is then presented in tables and narrative form. The next step after reduction and presentation is to summarize the analysis results to answer the research questions (Miles, methew, Huberman, A, 2014).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Linguistic Challenges and Strategies

Although the script is in accordance with the students' abilities, the performance of musical drama in English still requires attention to the linguistic aspects. As seen in Table 1, which presents the challenges and strategies in preparing for the performance of musical drama in English.

Table 1. Linguistic challenges and strategies of English Musical Drama

No.	Aspect	Challenges	Strategies
1.	General Challenge	Limited vocabulary makes it difficult to understand the script and memorize it.	a. Teacher assistance in understanding vocabulary. b. Memorize independently in stages and repeatedly,
2.	Dialogues In Performance	Dialogues are sung: Challenges in pronunciation, fluency, articulation while paying attention to musical elements. Spoken dialogues: Challenges in fluency, pronunciation, articulation and intonation	Practice focusing on the main aspects first, then gradually incorporate musical elements into it. Practice repeatedly every day, consult with teachers, imitate the pronunciation and intonation in reference videos.
3.	Opening Song	Differences between pronunciation and articulation abilities	Practice singing with the original song accompaniment first, then use the instrument alone.
4.	Narration	Challenges of pronunciation, fluency, articulation and intonation	Repeated practice, consultation with teachers, and imitation in the video references

General Challenges

Limited vocabulary is a challenge in performing musical dramas in English, as it can hinder comprehension of the script, for both actors and narrators. A good understanding is important so that role-playing activities can be played according to the objectives and easily understood by the audience (Yang & Qin, 2024). Learners often experience difficulties in learning new vocabulary, including recognizing spelling, word meaning, context, and the diversity of vocabulary forms (Nisa', 2022). This also makes it difficult to memorize dialogues (Arochman et al., 2023). The teacher's role as a facilitator is crucial in fostering student understanding through question-and-answer interactions, enabling them to grasp the text well. This approach can reduce anxiety and save learning time (Mollaei et al., 2017).

Understanding the meaning of the dialogue is the first step before memorizing it so that it can be conveyed naturally (Chen et al., 2016). Students memorize independently in stages and repeatedly, thus helping to strengthen long-term memory (Mendrofa & Wijaya, 2022). In addition, drama activities can contribute to the

mastery of new vocabulary through active activities and direct actions (Alshraideh & Alahmdi, 2020).

Challenges of Dialogue in the Performance

In musical performances, dialogue plays an important role in supporting the storyline, both in the form of ordinary speech and that conveyed through singing (Plemenitaš, 2016; Rahman et al., 2021). Each type of dialogue presents its own challenges for EFL students. In spoken dialogue, the difficulties generally lie in pronunciation, articulation, fluency, and intonation. Meanwhile, in musical dialogue, the challenge is more complex because pronunciation must remain clear and in tune with the melody of the song, which can be a challenge for students (Kuzmenkova & Erykina, 2017). Difficulties in linguistics can affect students' weak verbal abilities (Sabata et al., 2023).

In this exercise, students focus on linguistic aspects first, particularly on sung dialogue exercises. To meet this challenge, students practice pronouncing vocabulary repeatedly, regardless of the dialogue format. Through daily practice, their articulation and fluency in dialogue are honed (Abrar & Widiati, 2024). Another strategy used is imitation techniques from reference videos, both for regular dialogue and singing, so that students imitate pronunciation and intonation. This technique makes it easier for students to control the learning process by pausing or repeating the imitated portion of the video (Cvitkovic, 2024; Mardiyah & Santika, 2023). In this case, the teacher plays a facilitating role through a consultative approach to provide corrections and ensure that vocabulary pronunciation is clear and understandable (Pourhossein Gilakjani, 2016).

Various methods in dialogue training have proven effective when looking at the results of the performance. In terms of memorization, they have shown good abilities. In musical dialogues, pronunciation, articulation, and fluency have also improved, although there are still some shortcomings in pronunciation. While in spoken dialogues, the strategies applied have succeeded in improving fluency and pronunciation, but articulation and intonation still need to be improved because they do not fully reflect the story situation as in the reference video.

Challenges of Opening Song (Singing Together)

The show begins with the introduction of the characters and the opening song sung together. This song plays an important role in attracting the audience's attention, as well as functioning as a bridge between the real world and the fictional world in the musical drama that will be performed. However, in preparation, the students face linguistic challenges in the form of differences in pronunciation and articulation abilities between students. This challenge is related to the diverse language ability backgrounds of students in one study group (Abramova & Mashoshina, 2021).

Group exercises to improve pronunciation and articulation are carried out gradually through singing activities accompanied by original music and vocals. Through this activity, students listen to and imitate the pronunciation of native

speakers in songs, which is a form of implementing the shadowing technique (Hong, 2025; Kartika Sari & Jaya, 2025). Thus, singing activities not only train the musical aspect in drama performances, but also significantly support the improvement of articulation and accuracy of pronunciation in English.

Challenges of Narration Challenge (Narrator)

The role of the narrator is very important in conveying the narrative storyline so that it is easy for the audience to understand (Ashirova, 2024). However, narrators face various challenges, such as pronunciation, fluency, articulation and intonation in reading narrative texts. This is related to limited vocabulary, lack of reading strategies, low interest, and motivation. These factors are interrelated and have an impact on oral reading ability, so intensive practice is needed (Khildainy, 2023).

In vocabulary pronunciation practice, the teacher provides active support by helping students model pronunciation and answering questions about it. Students also use the Spelling Invention technique by writing down the sounds of difficult vocabulary words in their own spelling (Schrodt et al., 2024). This approach reinforces the teacher's crucial role as a facilitator. This aligns with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasizes collaborative learning through guidance and social interaction from teachers and peers. This allows students to be more active and not just learn independently (Muhayimana, 2017).

Fluency and articulation exercises are performed through repeated reading of the script. This drill method effectively improves reading skills, including word recognition, vocabulary recall, text comprehension, phonetic skills, and reading confidence (Yudha et al., 2025). Meanwhile, intonation exercises are performed by imitating patterns from animated video references. Using video models can help students understand prosodic aspects such as stress, rhythm, and intonation more accurately (Okada et al., 2017).

The strategy used was effective as seen from the aspects of articulation, pronunciation, and fluency during the performance, but it is important to note that the intonation is still not in accordance with the meaning that is intended to be conveyed, different from the intonation in the reference video.

Non-Linguistic Challenges and Strategies

English musical drama performances cannot be separated from non-linguistic factors as performative elements that influence the performance. Table 2 shows the challenges and strategies from a non-linguistic perspective.

Table 2. Non-Linguistic Challenges and Strategies

No.	Aspect	Challenges	Strategies
1.	Psychological	Feelings of shame, fear of saying the wrong thing, fear of forgetting the dialogue, and nervousness.	Implemented solution: a. Teacher suggestions and motivators

			b. Gradual Exposure Technique: Performing in front of a small audience
2.	Time Management	Limited time to prepare for the performance.	Management of time for independent and group practice

Psychology of student readiness

Self-confidence is the main challenge in performing musical drama. This performance is not just an ordinary learning practice witnessed by teachers and classmates, but rather a semi-formal performance with a wider audience, including students from various levels and boarding school administrators. Embarrassment and fear are forms of anxiety for EFL students when practicing in public (Hanifa, 2018). In addition, bad experiences that have been experienced previously can also trigger anxiety on other occasions (Annadawy, 2022). In overcoming psychological challenges, the involvement of teachers as a source of student motivation is very important so that students do not mind participating in the performance (Liandry, 2022; Putra, 2017). As a result, they have good self-confidence so that fears and negative thoughts are overcome (N. Rischi, 2021). In addition, a gradual exposure strategy was implemented, where students gradually practiced speaking or dialogue independently.

Then, they practiced speaking in a more structured way in drama groups, in more controlled situations, such as in front of other students, before facing a larger audience during a performance. This strategy aimed to reduce anxiety and increase readiness to use English in public (Simbolon, 2025). Thanks to the support of teachers, who were a key factor, and the implementation of this strategy, the students began to gain confidence in performing. Although some still appeared shy and less serious, even joking around on stage, the presence of teachers as mentors and motivators played a crucial role in boosting their confidence.

Time Management

Limited facilities and technical experience at the Islamic boarding school caused problems to arise during the dubbing process, leading to the decision to stage the show with live dialogue and singing. The actors were forced to memorize the dialogue in a short time, which presented a challenge and made it difficult to deepen and memorize the dialogue (Khasyar et al., 2021). This challenge is further compounded by the fact that students must divide their focus between their obligations as formal students and their Islamic boarding school activities. The impact is limited time for practice or overall preparation. In this situation, good time management is crucial for managing and organizing their time effectively.

The students took the initiative to organize their own practice by utilizing their free time in between their busy schedules. It was agreed that the practice with the teacher would be held during holidays or when there were no Quran classes at the Islamic boarding school. In addition, English language learning was temporarily suspended, diverted to stage preparation. Although time constraints were a challenge, the students tried to manage their time optimally. This time management plays a crucial role in increasing EFL students' productivity by helping them divide their focus, set priorities, and effectively complete both academic and non-academic responsibilities (F. Farah & Rahma, 2024; Harwinda, 2025).

Contextual Reflection of Islamic Values in the Santri Drama

This study does not explicitly address Islamic values education, but during the musical drama rehearsal and preparation process, it was evident how the teacher's role, the environment, and the learning strategies reflected naturally internalized Islamic values. This is in line with character education that can be found in Islamic boarding schools through various activities, including English language learning (Fajari, 2025; Shiddiq et al., 2024).

During the preparation process, the focus is primarily on developing technical skills and English language proficiency. However, the values of *ta'awun* (mutual assistance) and *ukhuwah Islamiyah* (brotherhood) are reflected between students and teachers through a spirit of cooperation. Meanwhile, the value of *tawadhu* (humility) is evident in students' openness to feedback (Iwarzah et al., 2024; Tijani & Husnah, 2022). The gradual and repetitive practice also teaches the values of patience and consistency, a process of character building through active and creative activities (Dimas et al., 2025).

Teacher support helps students overcome self-doubt, for example, by advising them not to worry too much about things that haven't happened yet, and to remain optimistic and responsible. Gradually, they begin to learn to trust in God, think positively, and face learning challenges more calmly (Aprilianti, 2024). Furthermore, this process also teaches the importance of optimally utilizing time (Asy'ari & Aini, 2025). Limited time actually encourages students to be more disciplined and efficient in each practice session.

Furthermore, this drama, adapted from an episode of *Upin & Ipin*, "The Shepherd and the Sheep," conveys a message about the importance of honesty through the story of a shepherd who is fond of lying and ultimately suffers a loss. This story has educational value aligned with Islamic teachings and demonstrates that learning English can also be a vehicle for instilling character values. Thus, this drama performance supports integrative efforts in Islamic boarding school education that emphasize character building (Nawangwulan et al., 2024; Rahman et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

English-language musical drama performances at Islamic boarding schools not only serve as a platform for showcasing English language skills, but also as a means of project-based language learning, while strengthening character, mentality, and Islamic values. In the process, students face linguistic challenges such as pronunciation, articulation, intonation, and fluency, as well as non-linguistic challenges such as psychological challenges and practice time constraints.

Although these challenges are quite complex, students are able to overcome them through various adaptive strategies, such as teacher guidance, gradual practice, repeated practice, imitation from reference videos, familiarization with performing in public, and time management. However, this performance still has several shortcomings that require attention, both linguistic and non-linguistic.

Further research is recommended to involve teachers' perspectives more broadly to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the strategies used in preparing performances. The use of observation methods from preparation to performance can also expand the research data. The integration of Islamic values in arts learning also needs to be studied more systematically to determine its contribution to student character development.

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