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UNVEILING EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUNDS: ENGLISH LEARNING STRATEGIES AMONG INDONESIAN *PESANTREN* AND GENERAL SCHOOL GRADUATES

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Abstract: This study addresses a significant gap in understanding how diverse educational backgrounds—specifically *pesantren*-based and general schools—influence English language learning strategies among Indonesian students pursuing higher education in English Language Education. Using a qualitative multiple case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with two students—one from each educational background—at a university in Malang. The findings revealed distinct differences in language learning strategies and study habits. Both groups employed the six strategies outlined by Oxford (1990), but with unique preferences. General school graduates favored informal strategies, such as social media use, video-based learning, and self-regulation, reflecting a flexible and autonomous learning environment. In contrast, *pesantren* students relied on structured strategies, including teacher-guided review and memorization, shaped by their religious education. Study habits differed as well, with general school students adopting flexible routines using digital tools and peer collaboration, while *pesantren* students adhered to disciplined, teacher-supported study habits. These differences impacted language proficiency, classroom participation, and academic performance. General school students demonstrated higher engagement and ambition, while *pesantren* students showed steady progress and strong foundational skills. The study emphasizes the need for tailored educational approaches that address students' diverse educational backgrounds to foster effective language learning and promote inclusive academic environments.

Keywords: *Educational background; English learning strategies; general school; pesantren.*

INTRODUCTION

It is critical to comprehend the interactions between contextual elements, teaching strategies, and individual learner characteristics as the demand for learning new languages in a variety of domains (Dornyei & Ryan, 2015; Griffiths & Oxford, 2014; Lightbrown & Spada, 2021). Language learning strategies encompass six major categories: cognitive, metacognitive, affective, memorization, affective, and compensation (Oxford, 1990). Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) is one such model commonly used to evaluate and classify these strategies. Recognizing this need, scholars and educators strive for and support methods that increase language acquisition, facilitate cross-cultural communication, and support students in

overcoming linguistic and cultural obstacles (Chamot, 2005; Mercer & Gkonou, 2020). Recent advancements underscore the importance of personalized learning approaches that consider cognitive, motivational, and sociocultural factors in language education. For instance, a meta-analysis by Lee and Lee (2024) demonstrates the effectiveness of AI-guided individualized language learning in enhancing learners' language development. Additionally, research by Teng (2023) highlights the role of learner autonomy and self-regulation in language acquisition. These studies emphasize the need for tailored instructional strategies that accommodate diverse learner profiles and contexts. Zen et al. (2019) highlight that the educational context, even at the primary school level, significantly impacts

learners' choice and effectiveness of language learning strategies. Their research emphasizes the necessity for language instruction to be tailored to the specific educational settings to optimize strategy use and learner outcomes. Direct exposure to English has the most significant positive influence on English language proficiency. Learning motivation also contributes positively, but the impact tends to be weak if it is not followed by real actions (Fatimah et al., 2025). On the other hand, Getie (2020) argues that attitudes toward EFL learning are positively influenced by social variables, such as encounters with native English speakers or peer groups, but negatively impacted by educational context elements, such as classroom environment or teaching methods. Furthermore, the usage of language learning strategies by EFL students can be impacted by both external and internal factors, such as teaching methods and resources, as well as internal characteristics like age, IQ, and personality (Xinyan, 2015). Therefore, it is critical to acknowledge the profound influence of life events, interpersonal relationships, and educational settings on learners' attitudes and approaches to language learning, highlighting the key role of cultural factors in the learning process.

The cultural background of students might be one of factors that have a significant role in deciding the choice of learning strategies (Al-khreshah, 2020; Grainger, 2012). Similarly, Anugerahwati and Dewanti (2022) emphasize that cultural materials and intercultural experiences deepen learners' understanding and application of language, enriching their communication competence. Isnaini et al. (2025) also indicate that students' educational backgrounds influence their language learning strategies and motivations, which in turn affect their intercultural awareness. Moreover, Setyowati et al. (2022) demonstrate that integrating environmental topics into EFL writing courses enhances students' writing performance and ecological awareness, highlighting the importance of aligning learning content with students' interests and contexts. This case is interconnected with the presence of different cultural backgrounds that contain varied cultural beliefs and values. Those diverse cultural backgrounds might be the right path to match the midpoint of students' learning strategies. Another important thing to be highlighted is the presence of educational background of students. Since each educational context might have different education patterns that also affect students' learning

strategies (Liu & Rao, 2023). Therefore, this study will attempt to focus on two different educational backgrounds that might influence the students' learning strategies which are *pesantren*-based schools and general schools.

In Indonesia, there are several types of schools based on the educational system. There might be different aspects that are provided by each of the educational systems, such as in *pesantren*-based schools and general schools. In *pesantren*-based schools, there is an integration of the curriculum which are religious study, natural sciences and social sciences (Musfah et al., 2020). Obviously, in general schools there is also an integration of the religious subject (Marmoah et al., 2021). However, it is different from the general schools based on the amount of learning frequency, *pesantren*-based school will have longer duration of learning religious subjects then the general schools and provides more varied religious subjects such as the integration of the learning of *kitab kuning* in school program (Nurhidin, 2022). In *pesantren*-based school, students' motivation and attitudes are significantly influenced by institutional support, well-structured programs, and teacher-student collaboration, rather than whether the *pesantren* is categorized as modern or semi-modern (Sholihah et al., 2024). While modern methods, often involving technology, are gaining traction, traditional approaches remain prevalent, each serving distinct educational, and cultural objectives within the context of Indonesian Islamic education (Alfisuma et al., 2025). In terms of multicultural backgrounds, *pesantren*-based schools might involve more students who come from different geographical, social, and cultural backgrounds (Latif & Hafid, 2021). Since students from diverse areas are able to enter the schools. However, in general schools, some schools have the policy to follow the zonation policy from the government (Qoyyimah, 2018). Therefore, this study highlighted the comparison of two different educational backgrounds, *pesantren*-based schools and general schools, since the different status and policy of schools might create an impact of different learning opportunities that influence students' learning strategies.

Extensive research has explored language learning strategies, including cognitive techniques like repetition and elaboration, and metacognitive methods such as planning and self-monitoring (Griffiths & Oxford, 2014). However, the application of these strategies is significantly influenced by cultural and educational

backgrounds. Cultural factors, including beliefs, values, and societal norms, shape how learners prefer and utilize these strategies. For instance, individuals from collectivist cultures may favor social strategies, while those from individualistic cultures might lean towards independent ones (Mercer & Gkonou, 2020). Educational experiences also play a crucial role in strategy selection and usage. Moreover, teaching methodologies can profoundly impact the development of language learning strategies. Integrating Critical Media Literacy (CML) into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms has been shown to enhance students' language learning strategies, with their educational backgrounds influencing their engagement and effectiveness with such innovative instructional methods (Afrilyasanti et al., 2025). This underscores the importance of adapting teaching approaches to students' diverse educational experiences to maximize language acquisition. Direct instruction on learning strategies aids students in becoming more aware and proficient, leading to improved language skills (Teng, 2023). Cross-cultural studies further highlight the significance of cultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds, along with teaching traditions, in shaping language learning strategies (Habók et al., 2021). Individual differences and specific contexts also influence university students' strategy choices (Sukyng, 2021). Interestingly, gender has minimal impact on strategy use among Central Asian learners; however, age and the duration of language learning experience do affect strategy selection (Chen & Zhang, 2024). Differences in language learning strategies are evident between Australian and East Asian students learning Chinese, reflecting cultural and educational influences (Liu & Rao, 2023). Studies on younger English as a Second Language (ESL) students reveal a variety of strategies employed to enhance their skills, emphasizing the need for educators to consider students' cultural backgrounds, beliefs, socioeconomic status, motivation, and interests when planning lessons (Vimalakshan & Aziz, 2021). Therefore, cultural, educational, and individual factors significantly shape the adoption and effectiveness of language learning strategies.

There is a significant lack of research on how students' language learning strategies are influenced by different educational backgrounds, such as *pesantren*-based schools and general schools. Many studies have ignored this area, failing to provide detailed comparisons of language learning strategies between graduates of

pesantren and general schools. This lack of research makes it difficult to understand how different educational experiences affect language learning methods. Additionally, there is not much research in Indonesia on how these different educational settings, especially the unique and sensitive nature of *pesantren*-based education, influence language learning strategies. This gap in research inhibits the development of effective language teaching methods that cater to the diverse cultural backgrounds of students from various educational systems.

This research aims to explore the language learning strategies used by graduates of *pesantren*-based schools and general schools, especially when they pursue higher education like master's degrees. These two educational backgrounds are important in Indonesia because they represent significant parts of the education system and have different approaches to learning, influenced by distinct cultural and religious views. By focusing on graduates from these backgrounds, the study seeks to understand how their unique educational experiences affect their language learning strategies in higher education. This understanding is key to creating effective language teaching methods that meet the diverse needs and backgrounds of students, improving educational outcomes, and promoting inclusive learning environments. Based on this research focus, there are questions formulated to be answered, as follows: (1) How do the educational experiences in *pesantren*-based schools and general schools shape students' language learning strategies in further EFL education settings? (2) What are the differences in study habits between *pesantren*-based schools and general school graduates in further EFL education settings? (3) In what ways do these differences impact students' language proficiency, classroom interactions, and learning outcomes in further EFL education settings?

METHOD

The focus of this study is to delve into the language learning strategies employed by graduates of *pesantren*-based schools and general schools within the context of pursuing a master's degree in English Language Education. The research drives the qualitative approach chosen for this study, as it allows for a deep exploration of the nuances and complexities surrounding the educational backgrounds of the participants. A multiple case study research design is utilized to facilitate an in-depth understanding of the differences in language learning strategies between *pesantren*-based and

general school graduates (Merriam, 2009).

The study is set within the academic environment of one of universities in Malang, focusing specifically on the English Language Education program. Purposive sampling is employed to select participants based on specific criteria aligned with the research objectives, ensuring a balanced representation of both educational backgrounds. The researchers conducted participant selection which was first done through distributing selection forms to master’s students. There were 11 students matched the criteria, after that, 1 student with *pesantren*-based school background and 1 student with general school background were chosen based on the criteria: the longest duration in the previous school and students with many achievements since this research aims to investigate the effective learning strategies. The participants consist of 1 student with a *pesantren*-based school background and 1 student with a general school background, offering diverse perspectives on language learning strategies.

Data collection involves semi-structured interviews conducted with the participants to gain insights into their language learning experiences and strategies. Thematic analysis is then used to identify patterns and themes within the data, providing valuable insights into the impact of educational backgrounds on language learning strategies (Miles et al., 2014). The findings will be presented clearly and coherently, offering meaningful insights into the role of educational backgrounds in shaping language learning strategies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Educational experiences shape language learning strategies differently

Educational experiences play a crucial role in shaping the ways students approach language learning. The distinct environments and teaching methods found in *pesantren*-based schools and general schools create varied foundations that influence learners’ strategies. These differences not only affect the choice of techniques students use but also shape their attitudes, motivation, and adaptability in acquiring English as a foreign language. Understanding how these educational backgrounds contribute to divergent language learning strategies is essential for developing tailored instructional approaches that address the unique needs of learners from diverse settings.

Table 1. *Educational experiences and language learning strategies*

Strategy types	General school graduates	Pesantren-based school graduates
Cognitive	repetition, summarizing	note-taking, using dictionaries
Metacognitive	planning, monitoring	review, self-checking
Affective	emotional regulation, motivation	group work, teacher encouragement
Compensation	using context to guess meaning	memorization techniques
Social	social media, group work	peer collaboration
Memory	mnemonic devices	texts memorization

Cognitive strategy

General school graduates tend to favor cognitive strategies like repetition and summarizing, which are informal and flexible methods that allow them to actively engage with the material in ways that suit their independent learning style. These strategies help them enhance understanding and improve retention of English. As one general school graduate shared,

"I often repeat words and summarize lessons to understand better. It helps me remember things."

This approach reflects a more self-directed, adaptable way of learning that aligns with the general school setting, which promotes autonomy.

In contrast, *pesantren* graduates prioritize more structured learning techniques, such as notetaking and frequent use of dictionaries. The *pesantren* environment encourages written methods as a way to deeply engage with and understand the material. As a *pesantren* graduate explained,

"I take notes and use a dictionary frequently. It's a habit from studying religious texts."

This method is rooted in their religious training, where written texts are fundamental to both their academic and spiritual education.

Metacognitive strategies

General school students tend to favor planning and monitoring their learning process. They take a proactive approach by organizing their study schedules and continuously assessing their understanding to ensure they stay on track. This strategy reflects a higher degree of self-regulation

and independence in their learning. As one general school graduate explained:

"I plan my study schedule and constantly check if I understand the material."

In contrast, *pesantren* graduates place a strong emphasis on self-checking and reviewing their lessons. The structured and disciplined environment of *pesantren* education fosters a habit of regular review, often with teacher guidance. This method helps students solidify their understanding of the material and allows them to identify areas that need further attention.

A *pesantren* graduate shared:

"I review what I've learned every night with my teacher. This helps reinforce my understanding."

Thus, while general school students focus on independent planning and monitoring, *pesantren* students rely on structured review within a supportive teacher-led framework.

Affective strategies

Affective strategies play a significant role in language learning, and their use varies between *pesantren* and general school graduates. *Pesantren* graduates are more inclined to rely on teacher encouragement and group work as affective strategies, which provide emotional support and motivation within a collaborative environment. One *pesantren* graduate shared,

"In group study, teachers encourage us, and that keeps me motivated."

This reflects how the *pesantren* environment fosters a strong sense of community and motivation through regular interactions with teachers and peers.

In contrast, general school graduates focus more on self-regulation and personal motivation to manage emotions during the learning process. As one general school graduate explained,

"When I get frustrated, I calm myself down by watching motivational videos. It helps me refocus."

This strategy highlights a more individualized approach, where students take responsibility for maintaining motivation through external resources like videos, aligning with their more independent learning style.

Compensation strategies

Compensation strategies are essential for overcoming language barriers, and their use differs between general school students and *pesantren* graduates. General school students tend to use contextual guessing as a key compensation strategy. They rely on the context in which a word appears to deduce its meaning, allowing them to navigate unknown vocabulary effectively. One general school graduate explained,

"I often use context to guess the meaning of a word I don't understand,"

It highlighted how they use surrounding information to fill in the gaps.

In contrast, *pesantren* graduates are more likely to use memorization techniques as a compensation strategy. Influenced by the religious education system, which emphasizes memorizing religious texts, they apply this method to learning English vocabulary. As a *pesantren* graduate shared,

"I memorize important texts and phrases to help me remember vocabulary."

This strategy reflects their traditional approach to learning, where memorization plays a central role in both academic and religious studies.

Social strategies

Social strategies play a vital role in language learning, particularly in facilitating communication and peer interaction. General school graduates are more inclined to use social media and group work as part of their social strategies. With a higher level of comfort in informal settings, they engage with diverse people through social platforms to practice English. As one general school graduate shared,

"I chat with people from different countries on social media to practice my English."

This approach highlights their preference for using digital tools and engaging in spontaneous conversations to enhance language skills.

In contrast, *pesantren* graduates tend to use peer collaboration in a more structured and formal context, especially in preparation for exams. One *pesantren* graduate explained,

"I study with peers, especially when preparing for exams."

This reflects the more organized, communal learning environment typical in *pesantren* settings,

where collaboration is encouraged in controlled, educational contexts rather than casual social interaction.

Memory strategies

Memory strategies are crucial for retaining vocabulary and concepts in language learning, and their use varies between pesantren students and general school graduates. Pesantren students place greater emphasis on traditional memory strategies, particularly by memorizing religious texts. This method, deeply ingrained in the pesantren educational system, helps reinforce memory and retention. A pesantren graduate shared,

"I memorize religious texts, which I also apply to learning new words."

This reflects their tendency to use memorization as a foundational learning tool, a skill honed through years of religious study.

On the other hand, general school students rely more on modern memory aids such as mnemonic devices to help them memorize new vocabulary. One general school graduate explained,

"I use mnemonic devices to memorize new vocabulary,"

This highlighted their preference for creative and structured techniques to assist with memorization. These differing approaches reflect the impact of each educational system on memory strategies.

Distinct study habits between pesantren-based and general school graduates

Study habits are deeply influenced by the educational environments in which students are immersed, shaping not only how they allocate their time but also how they engage with learning tasks. Graduates from *pesantren*-based schools and general schools demonstrate notably different approaches to studying, reflecting the cultural, social, and structural differences inherent in these educational settings. While *pesantren* students often develop disciplined, communal, and teacher-guided study routines, general school graduates may adopt more flexible and individualized habits. Exploring these distinct study behaviours is crucial to understanding how each group navigates the demands of further education and language learning.

Table 2. *Distinct study habits between pesantren-based and general school graduates*

Study habit	General school graduates	<i>Pesantren</i> -based school graduates
Study environment	Informal, flexible study spaces	Structured, disciplined study routines
Study timing	Flexible, often during free time	Structured, often at night after religious duties
Teacher support	Moderate, more peer-driven	High, dependent on teacher guidance
Technology use	High (e.g., social media, apps)	Low initially, increasing in higher education
Peer influence	High (e.g., group work, social learning)	Moderate (e.g., collaborative study in groups)

Study environment

Study environment plays a significant role in shaping how students approach their learning. General school students enjoy a flexible study environment, often choosing informal spaces like their desks, cafes, or even their rooms to study. One general school graduate shared,

"I study at my desk, in cafes, or even in my room. It's very flexible."

This flexibility allows them to adapt their study space to their comfort and convenience.

In contrast, *pesantren* students prefer structured and quiet environments that promote focus. A *pesantren* graduate explained,

"I usually study in a quiet room or in the mosque where I can focus better."

The *pesantren* setting encourages calm, dedicated study spaces like the mosque, which helps students concentrate on their studies.

Study timing

Study timing reflects the different routines established in general schools and *pesantren* environments. General school students tend to have more flexible study schedules, choosing to study whenever they find time or feel ready. One general school graduate shared,

"I study whenever I have time. It's usually in the evening or whenever I feel ready."

This approach allows for greater personal autonomy and adaptability, where study sessions are often integrated into their daily routine as needed.

In contrast, *pesantren* students follow a structured study routine, which is heavily influenced by their religious practices. A *pesantren* graduate explained,

"I study after my religious duties, typically in the evening after the evening prayers."

Their study time is scheduled around religious obligations, creating a more disciplined and organized study approach that balances academic and spiritual responsibilities.

Teacher support

Teacher support plays a pivotal role in shaping students' learning experiences, and its importance varies between general school and *pesantren* graduates. General school students tend to rely more on their peers for help and engage in more peer-driven learning. One general school graduate stated,

"I rely on my peers for help and only consult the teacher if absolutely necessary."

This suggests that general school students prefer independent problem-solving and often seek support from classmates rather than teachers.

In contrast, *pesantren* students place a higher value on teacher guidance, seeking continuous support from educators. A *pesantren* graduate shared,

"My teachers guide me, especially after class. I make sure to ask questions during review sessions."

This indicates that *pesantren* students have a more structured and teacher-dependent approach, where they benefit from direct interaction with their instructors.

Technology use

Technology use differs significantly between general school and *pesantren* graduates due to the distinct environments they were exposed to. General school students are extensive users of technology, integrating it into both their academic and social lives. One general school graduate shared,

"I use my phone and laptop for learning,

watching educational YouTube videos, and chatting with friends."

This reflects their comfortable reliance on digital tools for various aspects of life, including learning, social interaction, and entertainment, which enhances their overall learning experience.

In contrast, *pesantren* students had limited access to technology in their earlier education, as many *pesantren* environments impose strict rules on technology use. However, as one *pesantren* graduate noted,

"We weren't allowed to use technology much, but now in university, I use it to look up information."

This shows their adaptation to technology once they enter higher education, where access to digital resources becomes more common and integral to their learning process.

Peer influence

Peer influence plays a significant role in shaping how students approach their learning, with noticeable differences between general school and *pesantren* graduates. General school students are highly influenced by peer learning through social interactions and informal group work. One general school graduate shared,

"I always study with my friends. We help each other and share notes."

This highlights how their learning is often collaborative and flexible, with friends serving as a primary source of academic support and knowledge exchange.

On the other hand, *pesantren* students engage in more structured peer collaboration, particularly in the form of formal study groups. A *pesantren* graduate explained,

"In the *pesantren*, we work together in study groups, especially when preparing for exams."

This reflects a more organized approach to peer influence, where collaboration is often directed by academic schedules and group study sessions, maintaining a disciplined environment.

Influences on language learning aspects

The differences in educational backgrounds between *pesantren*-based and general school graduates extend beyond learning strategies to influence their language learning aspects. These variations shape how students engage with

language use, participate in classroom interactions, and ultimately affect their learning outcomes. Understanding role of educational background on these aspects provides valuable insights into how educational experiences contribute to student success and highlights the need for adaptive teaching approaches that accommodate diverse learner profiles.

Table 3. influences on language learning aspects

Factor	General school graduates	Pesantren-based school graduates
Language proficiency	High engagement, proactive in class activities	High discipline, steady progress, but initially reserved
Classroom participation	Active, eager to contribute	More reserved, culturally conditioned to respect authority
Learning outcomes	Higher ambition, goal-driven	Strong foundational skills, but often meet minimum requirements
Study engagement	Self-motivated, independent	Collaborative, peer-supported learning
Technology integration	Extensive use of digital tools for learning	Initially low but adapts over time with higher education exposure

Language proficiency

Language proficiency varies between general school and *pesantren* graduates, influenced by their educational backgrounds. General school students often exhibit high language proficiency, which is reflected in their active participation and confidence in using English. One general school graduate shared,

"I feel confident when using English. I participate actively and enjoy speaking with others."

This confidence stems from a more informal learning environment where students are encouraged to engage in discussions and practice English actively.

In contrast, *pesantren* graduates show steady progress in their language skills but tend to be more reserved in class. A *pesantren* graduate explained,

"I'm improving every day, but I still find it

difficult to speak fluently in class."

This reflects their more structured and formal educational environment, where less emphasis is placed on speaking, especially in front of others, limiting their oral fluency.

Classroom participation

Classroom participation differs notably between general school and *pesantren* graduates, influenced by their educational environments. General school students tend to be eager participants in classroom discussions, displaying confidence in expressing their ideas. One general school graduate shared,

"I speak in class as much as I can, and I enjoy engaging in discussions."

This openness stems from the more interactive, student-driven nature of general school classrooms, which encourages students to actively contribute.

In contrast, *pesantren* graduates are typically more reserved and prefer to listen carefully before speaking. As one *pesantren* graduate explained,

"I listen more in class and wait until I'm sure before speaking."

This reticence is influenced by the *pesantren*'s cultural emphasis on respect and humility, where students are often taught to listen and reflect before participating in discussions, which may affect their classroom interaction style.

Learning outcomes

Academic goals are shaped by the different educational experiences of general school and *pesantren* graduates. General school students tend to be goal-driven and highly ambitious, with a strong desire to excel academically. One general school graduate shared,

"I aim for top grades, and I'm always striving to improve."

This reflects their mindset of continuous improvement and striving for academic excellence, where achieving high grades is a key motivator.

In contrast, *pesantren* students focus more on foundational learning and meeting basic requirements rather than aiming for perfect grades. A *pesantren* graduate explained,

"I focus on passing exams and doing my best, but

I don't always aim for perfect grades."

This suggests that while *pesantren* students value education, their academic goals are more centered on completing the curriculum and fulfilling their obligations, rather than pursuing top marks.

Study engagement

Study engagement reflects the differences in learning preferences between general school and *pesantren* graduates. General school students tend to engage in more independent study, often utilizing online resources to guide their learning. One general school graduate explained,

"I prefer studying alone, especially through online resources."

This preference highlights their ability to manage their learning independently, relying on digital tools for research and self-paced learning.

In contrast, *pesantren* students place a higher value on peer-supported learning, where collaboration and mutual motivation play a key role. A *pesantren* graduate shared,

"I study with my peers. We motivate each other, and the group helps me stay on track."

This approach emphasizes the importance of group study in the *pesantren* setting, where social support and shared accountability foster a sense of collective responsibility for learning.

Technology integration

Technology use varies greatly between general school and *pesantren* graduates, reflecting their distinct educational backgrounds. General school students are highly integrated with technology, utilizing a wide range of digital tools to enhance their learning experience. One general school graduate explained,

"I use a lot of digital tools like apps and websites to practice and learn."

This shows how technology is embedded into their daily learning routine, helping them practice language skills, access resources, and engage with a variety of online platforms for education.

In contrast, *pesantren* students had limited exposure to technology in their earlier education due to restrictions in the *pesantren* environment. However, upon transitioning to higher education, they began to recognize the value of technology for

academic purposes. A *pesantren* graduate noted,

"At first, I didn't use technology, but now I find it useful for looking up new words."

This reflects their adaptation to digital tools in university, helping them overcome initial technological limitations and improve their learning efficiency.

Educational experiences shape distinct language learning strategies

The findings of this study confirm Oxford's (1990) framework on language learning strategies, particularly in the categorization of cognitive, metacognitive, and affective strategies. General school graduates tend to rely heavily on cognitive strategies such as repetition and summarizing, aligning with Oxford's (1990) assertion that active manipulation of material enhances learning. Additionally, their frequent use of social strategies like social media and video-based learning supports the claim made by Mercer & Gkonou (2020) that social interaction and peer engagement can significantly boost language acquisition. Conversely, *pesantren* students place more emphasis on structured, teacher-guided strategies, such as notetaking and memorization. The contrast between *pesantren* and general school students underscores how educational environments influence strategy choices—*pesantren* students benefit from structured, teacher-directed learning, while general school students benefit from autonomous, technology-driven approaches.

Distinct study habits reflect contrasting educational cultures

The study reveals distinct differences in study habits between general school and *pesantren* graduates, supporting Oxford's (1990) view that cultural factors and learning environments influence students' study behaviors. General school students prefer informal, flexible study environments, often using digital tools and engaging in self-directed learning. Oxford (1990) argues that such autonomy can lead to effective learning, and this aligns with the findings that general school students use social media and apps for language practice. This also echoes Sukying (2021), who emphasized the importance of self-regulation in language learning. In contrast, *pesantren* students are more accustomed to structured environments, such as studying in designated study rooms or the mosque, where learning is often guided by teachers and set routines. This reflects Bialystok's (2018) findings

that structured learning can enhance foundational language skills, even if it limits immediate autonomy. These contrasting habits highlight how education systems shape students' study preferences.

Influences on language proficiency and classroom interaction

The study also aligns with Dornyei & Ryan's (2015) assertion that educational backgrounds and cultural contexts impact both language proficiency and classroom participation. General school students exhibit higher language proficiency due to their active participation in discussions and use of digital tools, supporting Dornyei & Ryan's (2015) claim that interactive learning environments contribute to language development. As noted by Lightbrown & Spada (2021), active engagement in learning activities helps build language confidence. General school students' willingness to engage in conversations and classroom activities promotes language fluency. On the other hand, *pesantren* students, despite having strong foundational skills, tend to be more reserved in class. This is consistent with Getie's (2020) assertion that teacher-centered learning and structured review can foster proficiency, even if it results in less classroom interaction. The findings suggest that engagement plays a key role in language proficiency, but structured learning in *pesantren* settings can also lead to significant academic success.

CONCLUSION

This study fills a significant research gap by providing a comparative analysis of language learning strategies and study habits between *pesantren*-based and general school graduates within Indonesian higher education—an area previously underexplored in EFL contexts. This study explored how educational backgrounds—specifically *pesantren*-based and general schools—influence language learning strategies, study habits, and academic outcomes among Indonesian students in English Language Education. The findings revealed several key differences between the two groups.

First, both general school and *pesantren*-based school graduates employ six learning strategies proposed by Oxford (1990), including cognitive, metacognitive, compensation, memory, affective, and social strategies. However, educational experiences shaped distinct language learning strategies. General school graduates favored informal strategies, such as social media use,

video-based learning, and autonomous self-regulation, reflecting their more flexible learning environment. In contrast, *pesantren* students used more structured strategies, such as teacher-guided review and memorization techniques, influenced by their religious education system.

Second, differences in study habits reflected contrasting educational cultures. General school students exhibited flexible study routines, often relying on digital tools and peer interactions, while *pesantren* students adhered to disciplined study habits within a structured, teacher-supported setting. This shows how the learning environment influences students' study engagement.

Finally, the study found that educational background significantly influenced language proficiency, classroom interaction, and learning outcomes. General school students exhibited higher levels of engagement and ambition, contributing to their higher proficiency in English. Meanwhile, *pesantren* students, though reserved in class participation, demonstrated steady progress and strong foundational skills.

These findings highlight the need for tailored instructional strategies that consider students' diverse educational backgrounds. General school graduates thrive in autonomous, tech-driven environments, while *pesantren* students perform better in structured, teacher-guided settings. To enhance language acquisition and academic success, educators should adapt their teaching methods to address the varied learning preferences and strengths of students from different educational contexts.

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