The Interference of the Mother Tongue on the English Speaking Skill Development

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Abstract

Language is used as a communication tool to convey intentions, ideas, and thoughts. The first language or mother tongue is acquired early through interactions with family and the surrounding environment. As individuals grow older, they begin to acquire a second language, in this case, English, either naturally or through formal learning processes. However, during the acquisition of the second language, interference from the mother tongue often occurs, particularly in speaking skills. This study aims to uncover the common difficulties faced by students in speaking English due to mother tongue interference, as well as the strategies used to overcome these challenges. This research employs a qualitative approach with a phenomenological method. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and documentation from students in three classes: Class X, XI C, and XI D. Data analysis was conducted using the interactive analysis technique from Miles and Huberman, as well as the open coding technique from Strauss and Corbin. The validity of the data was tested through source and technique triangulation. The results of the study indicate that mother tongue interference occurs consistently in three main aspects: grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. For example, students often translate sentence structures directly from their mother tongue into English, use pronunciations influenced by local sounds, and mix languages when they encounter difficulties in finding vocabulary. To overcome these obstacles, students employ independent strategies such as watching English-language films, reading, listening to music, and practicing through informal conversations. In conclusion, mother tongue interference is a real challenge in mastering speaking skills, but it can be addressed with independent learning strategies and a supportive environment for English language habituation.

Keywords: Language acquisition, Language errors, Learning strategies, Mother tongue interference, Speaking skills.

INTRODUCTION

English is recognized as a lingua franca (ELF) in communication situations worldwide, alongside the acceleration of globalization (Murata, 2019). Like other languages, it has significant benefits in the modern world, particularly in the field of education. Among the four language skills, speaking competence is considered the most essential as it reflects an individual's ability to communicate and interact effectively. This skill also functions as a primary indicator of language proficiency, encompassing grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Furthermore, the development of effective speaking skills not only enhances academic achievement but also provides wider professional opportunities in today's interconnected era. In this regard, educational institutions emphasize the importance of speaking skills to prepare students for global communication challenges. Ultimately, strengthening students' speaking proficiency is not only vital for academic purposes but also for fostering cross-cultural understanding and collaboration in diverse communication settings.

This makes speaking skills one of the most important aspects of learning English, as it plays a crucial role in daily communication. Rao (2019) asserts that among the four existing language skills, speaking is regarded as the most significant in foreign or second language learning. The ability to speak not only reflects mastery of the language but also enhances learners' confidence in interacting with others. In the context of globalization, where intercultural communication is increasingly frequent, speaking proficiency becomes even more essential. Through speaking, students can express ideas, share opinions, and interact effectively, which contributes to their overall language development. Moreover, speaking skills are closely connected to students' critical and creative thinking abilities, as they must construct arguments and articulate their viewpoints clearly. Thus, mastering speaking skills in English is fundamental not only for academic success but also for building interpersonal relationships and preparing for future professional endeavors.

The importance of speaking in English learning cannot be separated from the challenges that learners face, particularly the influence of their mother tongue. Mother tongue interference occurs when students transfer patterns, vocabulary, or structures from their first language into English, resulting in errors in pronunciation, grammar, and word choice. Noviyenty and Irene Putri (2021) emphasize that such interference often leads learners to use incorrect grammatical forms that mirror the rules of their native language. Direct translation also contributes to the misuse of vocabulary, which may cause misunderstanding in communication. In many cases, the mother tongue becomes an immediate fallback when learners struggle to find appropriate words or sentence structures in English. Consequently, mother tongue interference becomes one of the primary barriers that hinder students from achieving fluency and accuracy in their English speaking competence.

Mother tongue interference is also evident in the English learning environment of SMAS Putri Al-Iman Sidrap, where students are encouraged to use foreign languages, both Arabic and English, in daily interactions. In this context, students often encounter difficulties when they do not fully master the vocabulary or sentence structures of the target language. As a result, they tend to mix their

mother tongue with English, which sometimes leads to misunderstandings and reduces the effectiveness of communication. For instance, when students attempt to express opinions in English, they may unconsciously adopt grammatical structures or vocabulary from their first language, altering the intended meaning. The boarding school environment, which strongly emphasizes the use of foreign languages, creates a unique situation where students feel pressured to maintain fluency, yet still rely on their mother tongue as a support system. This phenomenon highlights the need to examine more deeply how mother tongue interference shapes students' speaking practices in bilingual educational settings.

The bilingual environment in pesantren not only requires students to practice English and Arabic consistently but also creates linguistic pressure that influences their communication patterns. In such settings, students are often compelled to combine English with their mother tongue as a way to sustain fluency in daily interactions. While this strategy helps them to continue communication, it also slows down their mastery of the target language and forms language habits that do not align with the expected standards of fluency. These linguistic dynamics are unique to boarding school contexts, where the coexistence of multiple languages shapes both learning and social practices. Consequently, examining the phenomenon of mother tongue interference in bilingual environments becomes crucial for understanding the challenges that students face in developing their speaking skills.

The phenomenon of mother tongue interference in bilingual contexts has been widely discussed in previous studies. However, research that specifically explores students' experiences in pesantren, particularly in relation to speaking skills, remains relatively limited. The active use of two foreign languages, such as English and Arabic, in pesantren environments creates unique linguistic dynamics that differ from other educational contexts. Moreover, most previous studies employed quantitative or mixed methods to identify errors in students' English speaking caused by mother tongue interference. In contrast, this study applies a qualitative approach with phenomenology to gain deeper insights into students' real experiences. The focus is placed on exploring the specific difficulties students encounter when speaking English and the strategies they develop to overcome those challenges, which distinguishes this study from the existing literature.

Therefore, this research aims to investigate the most common difficulties faced by students in speaking English that makes them fall back to their mother tongue and to identify the strategies they employ to address these difficulties. By focusing on the lived experiences of students in a bilingual pesantren, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how mother tongue interference affects the development of speaking skills in such contexts. The findings are expected to contribute theoretically by enriching the discussion on language interference in foreign language acquisition and practically by offering valuable insights for teachers and students in dealing with speaking challenges. Ultimately, this study highlights the significance of exploring students' strategies in overcoming interference as part of their efforts to improve their English speaking competence.

RESEARCH METHOD

Participant

The participants of this study consisted of six students from SMAS Putri Al-Iman Sidrap, specifically from class X , XI C, and XI D. The participants were selected through purposive sampling. This sampling technique was applied to ensure that the participants represented the characteristics relevant to the focus of the study, particularly students who actively use English in daily communication within the pesantren environment. The selection was based on the consideration that these students could provide in-depth information about the influence of their mother tongue on the development of English speaking skills.

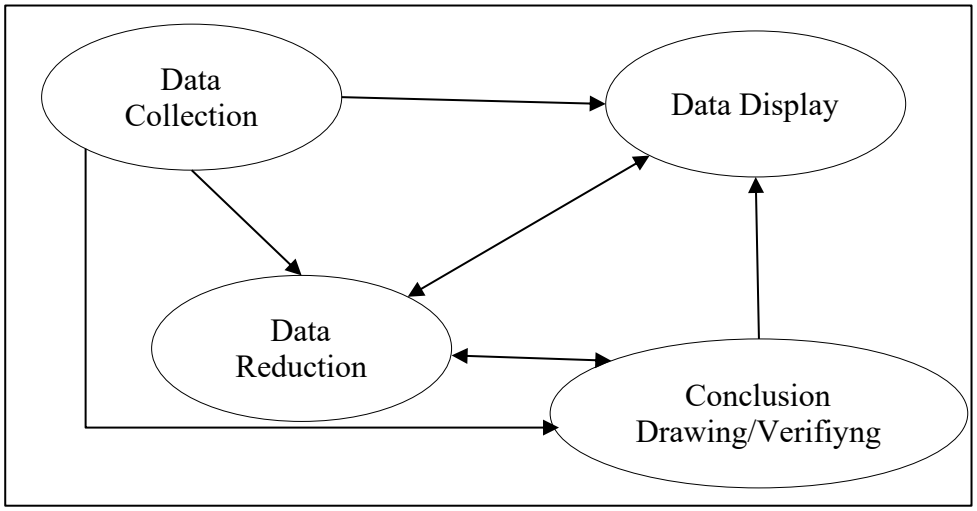
Course Descriptions

This study was designed using a qualitative research approach with a phenomenological method to explore students' experiences in dealing with mother tongue interference in English speaking. Creswell and Creswell (2018) explain that qualitative research is intended to understand the meaning individuals ascribe to social or human problems, making it suitable for investigating students' real experiences in learning English. The use of phenomenology was considered appropriate because it allows the researcher to capture participants' lived experiences and the meanings they attach to the challenges of speaking. Unlike quantitative research, which emphasizes numerical data and hypothesis testing, phenomenology focuses on describing and interpreting participants' perspectives in depth. Through this method, the researcher aimed to obtain authentic insights into how students perceived, experienced, and responded to the influence of their mother tongue in speaking English. This approach also enabled a deeper understanding of both the difficulties encountered and the strategies developed by the students in overcoming language interference.

After determining the research design and method, the next important step was to establish the procedure for analyzing the collected data. In qualitative research, data analysis plays a crucial role in organizing and interpreting large amounts of information obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation. Therefore, this study employed the interactive model of data analysis proposed by Miles and Huberman (1992) to systematically process the data. This model was considered appropriate because it allows the researcher to continuously move between data collection and analysis, ensuring that findings remain grounded in the participants' real experiences. The analysis of the data in this study consists of three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. In the reduction stage, the raw data obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation were carefully selected, simplified, and organized to focus on aspects relevant to the research objectives, particularly the influence of the mother tongue on students' English speaking skills. The reduced data were then presented in a systematic form through data display, allowing the researcher to identify patterns, themes, and relationships that emerged across participants' responses. Finally, conclusions were drawn and verified continuously throughout the research process to ensure accuracy and validity. This iterative cycle of reduction,

display, and verification not only made the analysis more manageable but also enabled the researcher to maintain a strong connection between the data and the interpretation of students' lived experiences. The interactive process of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing as proposed by Miles and Huberman is presented in the figure 1.

Figure 1. steps and component of data analysis by Miles and Hubberman (1992)



As an initial part of Miles and Huberman's interactive analysis, data reduction becomes an important stage to simplify and focus the data obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation. At this stage, researchers perform a coding process to group the data based on themes and sub-themes relevant to the research focus. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), coding is a fundamental step in qualitative research that allows researchers to organize raw data into meaningful categories. With this approach, participants' responses regarding their difficulties and strategies in speaking English due to mother tongue interference are elaborated upon and then grouped according to patterns that emerge repeatedly. This grouping process not only helps reduce the overwhelming amount of data but also ensures that the analysis remains rooted in the participants' real experiences.

Thus, the application of the phenomenological method combined with the interactive analysis model of Miles and Huberman, as well as the coding techniques of Strauss and Corbin, provides a solid foundation for this research. Each stage, from data collection to processing, is designed to maintain the connection between empirical findings and the real experiences of the participants. This approach not only ensures that the research results are based on valid and accountable data but also allows the researcher to delve deeper into the dynamics of mother tongue interference in English speaking skills. Therefore, the methodological framework used is believed to be capable of producing findings that are rich, profound, and relevant to the research objectives.

Instruments

The main instrument used in this research was a semi-structured interview, which allowed the researcher to explore students' experiences in depth while maintaining flexibility in asking questions. This type of interview was chosen because it provides an opportunity for participants to freely express their thoughts and feelings, while still giving the researcher guidance through predetermined questions. The interview questions were designed to focus on the difficulties faced by students in speaking English due to mother tongue interference and the strategies they employed to overcome these challenges. During the interviews, additional probing questions were asked when necessary to clarify or expand the participants' responses. The semi-structured format thus enabled the collection of rich and detailed data that reflected the students' lived experiences in a natural and authentic way.

The interview questions were adapted from Irene et al. (2023) and were developed to explore two main aspects: the difficulties students encountered in speaking English due to the influence of their mother tongue, and the strategies they employed to overcome these challenges. The questions were framed to investigate students' interest in learning English, the reasons behind their tendency to rely on their mother tongue in interactions, as well as their perceptions of how such reliance affected their language learning. Furthermore, the interviews also sought to reveal how students attempted to handle situations when they fell back to their mother tongue during communication. These guiding questions provided a balance between structure and flexibility, ensuring that the interviews remained focused while still allowing participants the freedom to elaborate on their personal experiences. The adaptation of these questions not only strengthened the validity of the instrument but also aligned it closely with the objectives of this research.

In addition to interviews, observation was also employed as a supporting instrument in this research. The observation focused on students' daily interactions in the pesantren environment, particularly their use of English and the tendency to switch to their mother tongue during communication. This technique allowed the researcher to directly witness how language interference occurred in authentic settings, such as in classrooms, dormitories, and informal conversations among peers. The observations were conducted in a non-participatory manner, with the researcher taking field notes to record significant instances of language use and communication difficulties. This instrument was considered essential to complement the interview data, as it provided contextual evidence that supported the participants' reported experiences. Through observation, the researcher was able to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the phenomenon of mother tongue interference in speaking English.

Documentation was also utilized as an additional instrument to strengthen the data in this study. The documents collected included relevant records that reflected the bilingual environment at SMAS Putri Al-Iman Sidrap. These documents provided supporting evidence of the institutional emphasis on using English and Arabic, which framed the context in which mother tongue interference occurred. Documentation helped the researcher to verify and cross-check information obtained

from interviews and observations, ensuring the accuracy and reliability of the findings. Furthermore, the use of documentation offered a broader perspective on how the school's policies and practices influenced students' speaking experiences. By combining documentation with interviews and observations, the study was able to achieve data triangulation, which contributed to the credibility of the research results.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that the main difficulties faced by students in speaking English lie in the aspects of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. These three areas consistently appeared in the interviews and observations, showing the strong influence of the mother tongue in shaping students' language production. Such difficulties often forced the students to fall back on their native language during communication, thereby reducing their fluency in English. This condition highlights that mother tongue interference does not only appear occasionally but has become a recurring challenge in the students' speaking development. Furthermore, the persistence of these difficulties suggests that interference plays a central role in shaping the way students construct and use English in their daily interactions.

Among the three main difficulties identified in this study, grammar emerged as the most dominant challenge experienced by the students. They often struggled to construct sentences correctly because they tended to transfer Indonesian sentence structures into English. This transfer led to frequent grammatical errors, particularly in the use of verb tenses. Several students admitted confusion in differentiating between past, present, and future forms, which caused them to mix tenses within a single sentence, as expressed by one participant: *"…but, if just like before. Like mixed up the past, future, present, mixed up."(K_I1, May 2025*). Another student emphasized the difficulty of mastering grammar rules by stating, *"…like the formula that make it hard. The additional word."(RA_I5, May 2025)* Errors such as producing sentences like *"She go to school yesterday"* instead of *"She went to school yesterday"* or *"I very like this"* instead of *"I like this very much"* reflect how Indonesian sentence patterns influence their English usage. These examples show that the students' reliance on the simpler structures of their mother tongue has a strong impact on the accuracy of their English, making grammar interference a persistent barrier in their speaking development.

In addition to grammar, limited vocabulary also appeared as a significant obstacle for the students in developing their speaking skills. Many participants admitted that they often lacked the appropriate English words and therefore inserted Indonesian terms into their sentences. One student stated, *"…for example, I don't know the English word for kipas, so I just said 'where are kipas'"* (M_I2, May 2025). Another expressed confusion when facing words with multiple meanings, saying, *"…like the word 'right,' it can mean correct, but also direction, and that confuses me"* (NSI_I4, May 2025). Such difficulties demonstrate that students had not yet acquired sufficient vocabulary to select accurate words for different contexts. For instance, they sometimes produced sentences like *"Because waktu kejadian…"* instead of *"Because at the time…"*, showing direct borrowing from

Indonesian. These examples highlight how limited vocabulary knowledge led students to rely on code-switching as a strategy, but at the same time, it hindered their ability to speak English fluently and consistently.

Pronunciation difficulties were also found to be a major challenge for the students in speaking English. Several participants admitted that they often felt uncertain about how to pronounce words and tended to rely on the sound system of their mother tongue. One student explained, *"…the pronunciation, yes, it makes me confused"* (I2_M, May 2025), while another added, *"…I feel tense when speaking English because I worry about mispronouncing words"* (I4_NSI, May 2025). These statements reflect how the influence of Indonesian phonology led students to pronounce English words literally based on their spelling. For instance, some students pronounced *"think"* as *"ting"* or *"three"* as *"tri"*, following the absence of the /θ/ sound in their mother tongue. Others pronounced words like *"burned"* as */bur-nehd/* or rolled the /r/ in *"true"*, reflecting Indonesian phonetic patterns. Such errors not only reduced their confidence but also affected their fluency, indicating that pronunciation interference was a consistent barrier in their speaking development.

Besides facing various difficulties, the students also developed several strategies to overcome the influence of their mother tongue in speaking English. These strategies emerged naturally as they attempted to maintain communication despite limited grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation skills. Some students reported practicing English through entertainment media such as movies or music, while others preferred reading English texts to expand their vocabulary. A few also relied on chatting in English with friends to improve their fluency in more informal contexts. These strategies demonstrate that although students struggled with mother tongue interference, they actively sought ways to reduce its impact. To provide a clearer picture, the following section discusses the most common strategies used by students along with their experiences.

The second main finding of this study highlights that, despite experiencing various difficulties in speaking English due to mother tongue interference, students actively develop different strategies to overcome these challenges. These strategies emerge both in formal learning contexts and in informal interactions, showing that students attempt to minimize their dependence on their first language in diverse ways. Interview results reveal that the strategies employed include independent efforts such as watching films, listening to music, and reading English texts, as well as interactional practices like chatting or conversing with peers in English. In addition, external support from teachers and peers through direct corrections also contributes to the improvement of their speaking abilities. These findings reflect students' growing linguistic awareness of their own weaknesses and indicate the presence of both internal and external motivation to improve their English skills.

One of the primary strategies employed by students to overcome mother tongue interference is engaging in independent learning activities, such as watching English-language films and listening to English songs. Students reported that films and music provide exposure to authentic pronunciation, vocabulary, and sentence structures, which they often mimic to practice correct speech. For instance, one

student explained, "If there is a vocabulary word whose meaning I am looking for, and then it appears in the movie, I repeat it and listen to the English" (RA_I5, May 2025). However, observational data revealed that in practice, not all students were highly motivated to use English-language media, as many preferred Korean or Chinese films with Indonesian subtitles, which limited the effectiveness of this strategy. Some students also carried small dictionaries or notebooks to record and review new vocabulary, as one participant shared, "Try to bring a small dictionary that contains Arabic, English, and Indonesian. Create a small notebook that includes everything" (M_I2, May 2025). These activities demonstrate initiative to familiarize themselves with English sounds and structures, even when classroom instruction is limited. Overall, independent strategies reflect self-directed learning and align with interlanguage theory, where repeated exposure and practice help reduce reliance on the mother tongue.

Reading English texts is another independent strategy used to strengthen vocabulary and understand sentence structures. Students often read short stories or articles and repeat sentences that are easy to remember, which helps them avoid translating directly from Indonesian. Observations note by researcher revealed that students frequently misused English sentence structures derived from Indonesian, such as assembling words one by one without following English syntax. One student stated, "Expand vocabulary. If it's from a movie, perhaps around one sentence" (NSI_I4, May 2025), demonstrating an awareness of the incremental process of learning vocabulary. This strategy is reinforced by note-taking and repetition, which helps internalize new words and grammatical patterns. By combining reading with dictionary use and active review, students gradually build a personal linguistic system that compensates for mother tongue interference. This approach reflects both linguistic awareness and self-regulation, which are central to the interlanguage development process.

Interaction with peers is another key strategy, occurring through both face-to-face conversations and digital communication. Observations in Class X revealed that students actively discussed reading passages in English, although they often engaged in code-switching or used Indonesian sentence structures when unsure of vocabulary. For example, a student said, "I also sometimes talk to myself because some friends don't know… but there are also some friends of mine who understand English, and I speak in English with them" (ZN_I3, May 2025). Chatting via social media provides a relaxed context for practicing sentence construction and vocabulary, allowing students to experiment without the pressure present in formal classroom settings. During activities in the dormitory environment, students also corrected each other's pronunciation mistakes, indicating peer support as a vital interactional mechanism. These strategies show that social interaction can facilitate real-life language use and promote self-correction, which is consistent with L2 communication strategies described by Selinker (1972).

Social support from teachers and peers, along with a conducive English-speaking environment, significantly affects students' ability to reduce mother tongue interference. Observation in Class X showed that when students struggled with vocabulary or sentence structure, teachers intervened to provide the correct

English equivalents. Students expressed, "…I ask the teacher or my friend who is more knowledgeable… I ask about the correct pronunciation or look it up myself on the internet" (ZN_I3, May 2025). Peer support was also observed during informal sessions, where students corrected each other's pronunciation, helping each other internalize correct forms. The presence of a structured English environment, such as the language unit, encouraged students to use English more consistently, although the use of mother tongue remained common among some students. Observations highlighted phenomena such as code-switching, literal translation, and mispronunciation (e.g., "Because eee… waktu kejadian," "Two thusand hundred residents"), demonstrating ongoing interference despite these support mechanisms. These findings suggest that environmental and social factors are critical for reinforcing independent and interactional strategies and preventing fossilization of errors.

Overall, the combination of independent learning, interaction with peers, and social support demonstrates a comprehensive approach to coping with mother tongue interference. Independent strategies, including media exposure and reading, provide repeated input and practice, while interactional strategies and environmental support enable practical application and immediate feedback. Observational data further emphasize that these strategies are not uniformly effective, as students' motivation and engagement vary depending on context and activity type. Nevertheless, these practices collectively reflect linguistic awareness, self-regulation, and the interlanguage process, in which learners actively refine their language systems based on exposure, practice, and feedback (Selinker, 1972). The findings complement previous research by highlighting the role of personal initiative, peer correction, and structured language environments in reducing mother tongue interference, demonstrating an integrated and learner-centered approach to English acquisition.

The findings of this study highlight a dynamic relationship between the difficulties students face in speaking English and the strategies they employ to overcome them. Students' main challenges—grammar, limited vocabulary, and pronunciation—often lead them to rely on their mother tongue, resulting in code-switching, interlanguage errors, and hesitation during communication. These difficulties are compounded by environmental and socio-linguistic factors, such as limited exposure to English outside the classroom and habitual use of Indonesian with family and peers. In response, students adopt various strategies to cope with these challenges, including independent activities such as watching English-language media, listening to music, reading, chatting with peers, and seeking assistance from teachers or more proficient classmates. Observational data show that peer support and teacher guidance are particularly effective in helping students correct mispronunciations, expand vocabulary, and improve sentence construction. Overall, these findings illustrate that while mother tongue interference remains a significant obstacle, students actively engage in self-directed and collaborative strategies to mitigate its effects, reflecting a process of interlanguage development and gradual progression toward greater fluency and accuracy in English.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that the most common difficulties students face when speaking English stem from interference from their mother tongue. These difficulties primarily appear in grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. Grammatical challenges include errors in verb tense usage, subject-verb agreement, and sentence structures that reflect the patterns of students' first language. Pronunciation errors often involve substituting unfamiliar English sounds with more familiar native sounds, while vocabulary challenges arise when students directly translate words or expressions from their mother tongue, producing awkward or incorrect English sentences. These errors occur repeatedly and systematically, highlighting the effects of negative language transfer and aligning with the concept of interlanguage, where students' linguistic systems are influenced by both their first language and the target language.

In addition to cognitive factors, environmental and social contexts play a significant role in reinforcing mother tongue interference. Although the pesantren setting encourages the use of English and Arabic, students' habitual use of their native language outside formal instruction contributes to persistent errors, particularly in informal or spontaneous communication. Observational data reveal frequent instances of code-switching, literal translations, and pronunciation influenced by L1, which demonstrate that mother tongue influence is not only a matter of knowledge gaps but also deeply rooted social habits. This emphasizes that addressing speaking difficulties requires attention to both linguistic and contextual factors, including peer interactions and the broader language environment.

Despite these challenges, students actively employ strategies to reduce reliance on their mother tongue and improve their English speaking skills. Independent strategies include watching English films, listening to English songs, using dictionaries, and taking notes on new vocabulary. Interactional strategies involve chatting with peers in English and engaging in conversations that encourage real-time language use. Additionally, social support strategies, such as corrective feedback from teachers and peers, help students recognize and correct errors in grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. These combined efforts reflect students' motivation, self-awareness, and active engagement with the language, illustrating that mother tongue interference is a transitional phase in second language acquisition. Creating a supportive language-rich environment, providing consistent feedback, and fostering learner autonomy are therefore essential for helping students gradually achieve greater fluency and accuracy in English.

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