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Research Article

Developing Public-Speaking Agency Through Muhadharah: An Exploratory Study of Female Students in an Indonesian Islamic Boarding School

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Abstract

This study aims to explore how Muhadharah, a structured religious public-speaking program, develops public-speaking agency among female students in an Indonesian Islamic boarding school. Using a qualitative institutional case-study design, data were drawn from three role-specific semi-structured interviews with the boarding-school leader, a female Muhadharah advisor, and one participating student. Interview data were analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis and role-based comparison. The findings reveal an institutional performance cycle consisting of protected weekly scheduling, rotating communicative roles, script preparation, peer-mentor support, repeated rehearsal, live delivery, collective feedback, and recognition. The student described a gradual transition from fear and embarrassment toward stronger confidence, clearer delivery, improved intonation, and greater responsibility. Program continuity was constrained by memorization demands, anxiety, limited time, competing activities, weather, and power interruptions, but was supported through group rotation, mentor assistance, alternative venues, portable lighting, and reward-based reinforcement. The study positions Muhadharah as a gender-responsive support system rather than merely a speech-training activity. It recommends a staged progression from full scripts to outline-based speaking, rubric-guided formative feedback, and protected low-stakes performance opportunities.

Keywords: Female Boarding Students; Islamic Boarding School; Muhadharah; Public-Speaking Agency.

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INTRODUCTION

Islamic boarding schools, commonly known in Indonesia as pesantren, are educational communities in which religious learning, communal life, character formation, and social preparation are closely integrated. Within this setting, Muhadharah is a structured religious public-speaking program in which students deliver speeches, host events, recite Qur'anic passages, lead prayers, and perform nasheed. Recent studies identify Muhadharah as a practical pathway for strengthening communicative competence, confidence, and early da'wah capacity [1], [2], [3]. They further show that sustained outcomes depend on institutional organization, recurrent practice, language development, mentoring, and an explicit moral purpose rather than isolated public appearances [4], [5], [6], [7].

For female boarding students (santriwati), these opportunities extend beyond technical fluency. Repeated, supported performance can widen participation in educational, religious, and community-facing spaces while enabling students to exercise voice in a culturally responsive setting. Nevertheless, public performance is psychologically demanding: speaking anxiety may involve physiological arousal, fear of evaluation, avoidance, disrupted recall, and reduced message control [8], [9]. These challenges are especially salient for novice speakers who perform before highly visible peer audiences.

A useful explanatory frame combines academic self-efficacy, self-management, and self-regulated learning. Learners are more likely to prepare, persist, and adapt when they perceive themselves as capable of performing a demanding task and can plan, monitor, and regulate their learning [10], [11], [12]. Practice alone, however, is not automatically developmental. Its value depends on feedback that clarifies current performance, specifies attainable next steps, and enables learners to use peer and instructor input productively [13], [14], [15], [16].

This perspective shifts attention from speech delivery as an individual talent to public-speaking agency as a supported capacity. Agency denotes the expanding ability to prepare, make communicative choices, regulate emotion, speak responsibly, and respond to an audience. It is associated with learner participation, motivation, achievement emotions, and opportunities for active engagement [17], [18], [19], [20], [21]. In a gender-responsive institutional frame, recurring speaking activities can become resources through which young women acquire voice, visibility, and responsibility [22].

The study was motivated by early institutional observations that some female students remained hesitant, overdependent on scripts, and limited in eye contact, vocal variation, and spontaneous idea development. Accordingly, this study explores how Muhadharah is institutionally organized, how the available informants describe its contribution to female students' public-speaking agency, and which constraints and adaptations shape program continuity. Because the evidence comprises three role-specific interviews, the analysis is explicitly exploratory and does not claim population-level effectiveness.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive institutional case-study design [23], [24] to examine how Muhadharah was organized and experienced at Jauharul Falah Al-Islami Islamic Boarding School, Muaro Jambi, Indonesia. The design was appropriate because the study sought to interpret program routines, institutional roles, student experiences, instructional practices, and contextual constraints rather than quantify effects or estimate causal relationships. The case orientation enabled the program to be examined within its natural boarding-school environment, where religious learning, communal routines, gender-responsive participation, and communication training intersect.

Participants and Sampling

The study population comprised female students who actively participated in Muhadharah and institutional actors responsible for planning, supervising, and evaluating the program. The available evidence base consisted of three purposively selected, role-specific informants: one boarding-school leader (L1), one female Muhadharah advisor (A1), and one participating female student (S1). Inclusion criteria required that L1 have direct knowledge of institutional policy and program organization; A1 be directly involved in student preparation and evaluation; and S1 have direct experience of preparing for and performing in Muhadharah. Purposive sampling was used to obtain complementary perspectives across governance, pedagogy, and student experience. The small role-based corpus was intended for analytic triangulation rather than statistical representation; therefore, the findings are not presented as generalizable or as evidence of thematic saturation.

Operational Definition of Analytical Domains

Because this was not a variable-based survey, the study used operational analytical domains rather than independent and dependent variables. These domains converted the research questions into observable and reportable aspects of implementation: institutional design, preparatory support, public-speaking performance, evaluation, and contextual enablers and constraints. Table 1 specifies how each source was used and delimits the interpretation that may be drawn from it.

Table 1. Participants, Sources, and Operational Analytical Domains

Participant/Source	Selection or Inclusion Rationale	Operational Analytical Domain(s)	Evidentiary Contribution and Boundary
L1: Boarding-school leader	Held institutional responsibility and direct knowledge of program policy, scheduling, and resourcing.	Institutional design; participation architecture; recognition; organizational constraints.	Explains governance and institutional arrangements; does not establish individual student outcomes.

Participant/Source	Selection or Inclusion Rationale	Operational Analytical Domain(s)	Evidentiary Contribution and Boundary
A1: Female Muhadharah advisor	Directly involved in student preparation, rehearsal, assessment, and practical problem-solving.	Preparation; peer-mentor scaffolding; performance criteria; feedback; implementation barriers.	Explains instructional practice; no individual performance scores or longitudinal assessment records were supplied.
S1: Participating female student	Had direct experience of receiving a speaking assignment, preparing a speech, and performing before peers.	Confidence; readiness; delivery; self-management; perceived benefits and difficulties.	Provides an individual experiential account; cannot represent all female students.
Observation protocol	Designed to guide observation of participation, verbal delivery, non-verbal communication, and feedback responses.	Observed performance indicators and interactional context.	Used to define the planned observational focus; completed field notes were not supplied for analysis.
Documentation checklist	Designed to identify schedules, rules, facilities, evaluation records, and activity documentation.	Program infrastructure and documentary corroboration.	Used to define the documentary focus; the requested documentary set was not supplied as an independent corpus.

Data Collection Procedure

The research protocol specified three complementary techniques: role-specific semi-structured interviews, direct observation, and documentation. The leader interview elicited information on program rationale, institutional policy, scheduling, participation arrangements, rewards, and organizational barriers. The advisor interview addressed group organization, script review, rehearsal, assessment criteria, student anxiety, feedback, and contingency arrangements. The student interview elicited experiences of preparation, confidence, perceived change, difficulties, coping strategies, and expectations. The supplied materials also include observation and documentation checklists. However, the analyzable corpus available for this

article consists of the three interview records; completed observation notes and the requested documentary files were not provided. They were therefore used to define the intended data scope rather than treated as separate empirical findings.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a structured reflexive thematic procedure. First, the three interview records were read repeatedly to establish familiarity with each role-specific account. Second, meaning units were coded deductively from the research focus—implementation, public-speaking development, enabling conditions, and constraints—and inductively from participants' accounts. Third, codes were compared across L1, A1, and S1 in a role-comparison matrix. Fourth, related codes were refined into themes describing participation architecture, preparatory scaffolding, perceived development, and local adaptations. The analytical process was informed by contemporary guidance on reflexive and hybrid thematic analysis [25], [26], [27], [28], with attention to sample adequacy, transparent reporting, and researcher reflexivity [29], [30], [31], [32]. Given the restricted corpus, the study makes no claim of thematic saturation or statistical generalizability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Nested Participation Architecture

The first finding is that Muhadharah is not organized as an occasional extracurricular activity. It is embedded in a nested participation architecture. L1 described a protected weekly time allocation on Friday evening so that the program does not compete directly with other routine activities. At class level, students are divided into groups and take turns performing. A1 specified that a class commonly has four groups, each containing approximately five to eight students. At a higher institutional level, the school holds a monthly Muhadharah Akbar — a larger forum conducted separately for male and female students — and combined performances at the beginning and end of a semester.

This arrangement broadens the meaning of participation. Students do not only deliver speeches. They may serve as master of ceremonies, Qur'an reciter, speaker, prayer leader, nasheed performer, or conclusion presenter. L1 also indicated that students are expected to take notes, summarize, and then speak in public. Thus, the program distributes communicative exposure through several roles with different degrees of spontaneity, ritual responsibility, and audience visibility. The resulting structure is a repeated participation pathway rather than a one-off test of who is already confident. Table 2 summarizes how the layered program architecture distributes speaking exposure and support across weekly, group, monthly, and term-level forums.

Table 2. Participation and Delivery Architecture of the Muhadharah Program

Program Layer	Reported Arrangement	Public-Speaking Function	Gender-Responsive Significance
Weekly forum	Friday evening after Isha; class groups rotate	Creates predictable recurrent speaking exposure	A regular, familiar forum can reduce the social risk of first attempts
Small-group organization	Approximately four groups per class; 5–8 students per group	Allows task allocation, peer rehearsal, and role circulation	Creates an immediate support network before public appearance
Monthly Muhadharah Akbar	Larger event; male and female students convene separately	Extends audience scale and recognition opportunities	Offers a larger public platform while retaining a gender-sensitive setting
Term opening and closing events	Combined participation of all students	Signals institutional value and increases performance visibility	Links female students' communicative development to institutional belonging
Role rotation	MC, Qur'an recitation, speeches, prayer, nasheed, summary	Develops multiple communicative practices beyond formal speech	Prevents public voice from being restricted to a small group of habitual speakers

Preparation, Peer-Mentor Scaffolding, and Evaluation

The second finding concerns the instructional sequence that precedes performance. A1 reported that direct guidance by the advisor alone is difficult because of the number of students. Female student mentors (mudabbiroh) therefore help inspect scripts, check the relationship among title, theme, and content, and support preparation. Students who will perform are reportedly called for two to three rehearsals during the week. The primary method described was reading a prepared script and then memorizing it before the scheduled event.

The program's assessment focus is practical and multidimensional. A1 identified courage and readiness, public-speaking delivery, facial expression, vocal intonation, and alignment between the theme and message as key criteria. Feedback is provided collectively after the activity, with explicit attention to what was weak and what should be improved. The student account complements this instructional description: S1 prepared content according to the theme, wrote or noted the speech, memorized it, and rehearsed with peers or in front of a mirror. Preparation therefore functioned as both content planning and emotion regulation. Figure 1 integrates these elements into an interview-supported implementation model linking institutional design, preparation, performance, feedback, and perceived agency development.

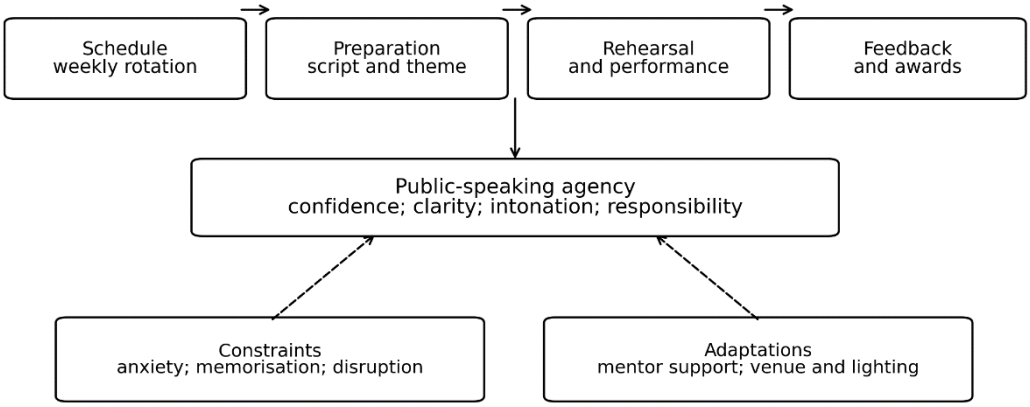


Figure 1. Qualitative Implementation Model for Public-Speaking Agency Derived from the Role-Specific Interviews

Reported Development of Public-Speaking Agency

The student account provides a cautious but meaningful description of perceived development. S1 recalled initial fear and embarrassment when speaking before a large audience. After participating several times, she reported becoming more accustomed to performing and more confident when speaking. She also described better control of intonation, clearer presentation of material, and greater confidence in addressing an audience. In addition to skill, the student associated participation with broader knowledge, courage, and responsibility because a scheduled role required preparation and visible contribution.

These statements should be interpreted as an individual participant narrative, not as a quantitative gain. Nevertheless, the alignment between S1's account and the institutional design described by L1 and A1 suggests a plausible development mechanism: scheduled participation creates a reason to prepare; rehearsal makes preparation observable; public performance produces a salient experience; and feedback creates a next target. The key outcome in this evidence is therefore not a score, but a reported shift from avoidance and fear toward familiarity, responsibility, and more controlled delivery. Table 3 distinguishes evidence-supported dimensions from domains that remain only planned observational targets.

Table 3. Interview-Supported Public-Speaking Dimensions

Dimension	Evidence in the Materials	Interpretation Appropriate to this Study
Confidence and readiness	A1 assessed courage/readiness; S1 reported reduced fear after repeated participation	Repeated exposure may support familiarity; no pre-post score is available
Voice, intonation, and clarity	A1 assessed intonation; S1 described improved intonation and clearer delivery	A perceived delivery improvement, corroborated by the advisor's evaluative emphasis

Dimension	Evidence in the Materials	Interpretation Appropriate to this Study
Expression and audience orientation	Observation protocol targeted facial expression, eye contact, body language, and audience interaction	A planned assessment domain; no completed field notes permit claims about observed change
Content organization	S1 wrote/noted, memorized, and rehearsed a themed text; A1 reviewed theme-content suitability	Preparation connected message construction to delivery readiness
Responsibility and participation	L1 described rotational duties; S1 associated the role with responsibility and courage	Role assignment positioned public speaking as a collective institutional responsibility

Enabling Conditions, Constraints, and Local Adaptations

The third finding is that continuity depends on several institutional supports. L1 identified the school's requirement that students participate, a dedicated schedule, group-based rotation, and competitions with certificates, trophies, and other recognition as major supports. A1 emphasized the role of female student mentors in monitoring scripts and assisting practice. These supports locate Muhadharah within a visible institutional routine rather than leaving performance opportunities to students' personal initiative.

At the same time, constraints are substantive. L1 highlighted the density of boarding-school activities, students' memorization burdens, and the limited weekly time allocation. A1 described nervousness that can cause learners to forget memorized content, slow memorization, power failures, rain, and coinciding activities. The school's responses include emotional reassurance, reminder of preparation, collective feedback, use of generators or rechargeable lights, and relocation from the pavilion to classrooms, dormitories, or the mosque during rain. These adaptations show that program continuity is negotiated through infrastructure and care, not only individual motivation. Table 4 shows that continuity depends on the interaction of policy, mentoring, psychosocial support, infrastructure, and recognition.

Table 4. Enablers, Constraints, and Reported Adaptations

Domain	Enabling Condition	Constraint	Reported Adaptation
Institutional policy	Dedicated weekly slot; rotation; monthly and term events	Many other boarding-school activities; limited time	Protected schedule and layered events
Instructional support	Advisor and female student mentors; script checks; 2–3 rehearsals	Advisor cannot guide every student directly; memorization difficulty	Peer-mentor support and pre-performance review
Psychological support	Repeated participation, encouragement, feedback	Nervousness, fear of forgetting, low confidence	Reassurance, preparation reminders, breathing/prayer strategies reported by S1
Physical setting	Use of pavilion and alternative spaces	Rain and power outages	Generator/portable lighting and venue relocation

Domain	Enabling Condition	Constraint	Reported Adaptation
Motivation and recognition	Competitions, certificates, trophies, recognition	No direct evidence of long-term engagement outcomes	Reward-based reinforcement in larger forums

Discussion

Muhadharah as an Institutionalized Performance Cycle

The findings suggest that Muhadharah is best understood as an institutionalized performance cycle. Its educational value does not rest solely on delivering a speech; it emerges from the coupling of protected scheduling, role rotation, preparation, rehearsal, performance, feedback, and recognition. This interpretation extends Indonesian studies that position Muhadharah as a medium for da'wah communication, confidence building, and pesantren program management [1], [2], [3], [4], [5], [6], [7]. The present case adds a process explanation: access to public voice is distributed through roles with different levels of visibility, allowing novice speakers to enter through bounded tasks before assuming more demanding communicative responsibilities.

This structure is consistent with recent evidence linking perceived efficacy, self-management, and self-regulated learning to persistence and performance [10], [11], [12]. Rotation increases the likelihood that speaking experience is distributed beyond already-confident students, while S1's account of moving from fear toward familiarity illustrates a plausible agency-development pathway [17]. The evidence does not establish that every student progresses identically; it supports an institutionally plausible mechanism and one participant-reported trajectory.

Feedback, Peer Support, and Psychosocial Safety

The program's feedback and peer-mentor features are especially important for a gender-responsive educational interpretation. A1 reported that the advisor could not guide every student individually, while female student mentors reviewed scripts and supported preparation. This arrangement is more than logistical: it makes assistance proximate, increases opportunities to rehearse, and can reduce novice speakers' isolation. Contemporary feedback research emphasizes clear performance criteria, learner uptake, self-assessment, and peer-supported dialogue rather than one-way correction [13], [14], [15], [16].

The reported collective evaluation is developmentally promising but requires greater specificity. The available materials do not show whether students receive a transparent rubric, individualized comments, or an opportunity to set a next-performance goal. A concise formative rubric—covering message organization, voice and pace, audience orientation, nonverbal expression, and a reflective next step—would make feedback more actionable. It would also support psychosocial safety by framing errors as information for improvement rather than as public failure.

The Script-Memorization Tension

A central pedagogical tension concerns the dominant progression from reading a prepared text to memorizing it. A full manuscript can reduce uncertainty, protect thematic accuracy, and support novice readiness. Yet it may also intensify anxiety when recall is disrupted, causing a

learner to lose the next line during a visible performance [8], [9]. In this case, manuscript use functions simultaneously as scaffold and constraint.

The improvement pathway should therefore transform, rather than remove, preparation. Novice speakers can begin with full manuscripts and modelled delivery; intermediate speakers can use structured outlines containing an opening, key messages, supporting religious references, local examples, transitions, and a conclusion; advanced speakers can practise short extemporaneous responses and audience adaptation. This progression supports planning and monitoring while gradually increasing active performance demands [12], [20], [21]. Figure 2 presents the proposed sequence: scaffolding decreases as learner autonomy, adaptability, and audience responsiveness increase.

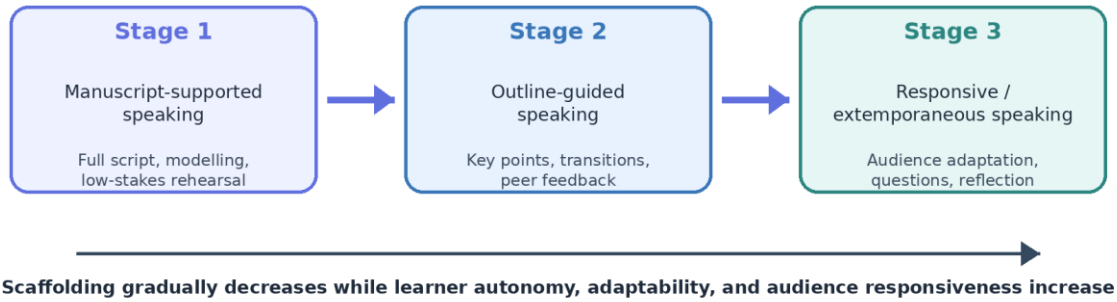


Figure 2. Proposed Staged Progression from Manuscript-Supported to Responsive Public Speaking

The novelty of this study lies in reframing Muhadharah as a gender-responsive institutional support system for public-speaking agency. Previous research commonly treats the activity as da'wah training, general public-speaking practice, or pesantren management [1], [3], [4]. This case foregrounds the institutional conditions that make female students' participation possible: protected time, multiple roles, peer-mentor scaffolding, formative feedback, recognition, and adaptation to environmental disruption. The contribution is therefore a process model, not a claim that the program automatically empowers every participant.

The findings have practical implications. School leaders should protect recurring speaking opportunities as part of educational participation rather than optional ceremony. Program designers should adopt the staged progression shown in Figure 2, train female student mentors to use a concise coaching guide, and maintain contingency plans for weather, electricity, and space. Evaluation should also collect simple longitudinal evidence—attendance, role history, rubric scores, student reflections, and selected observation notes—so subsequent studies can examine developmental change more rigorously. These actions connect institutional resources to meaningful agency and participation [22].

CONCLUSION

Muhadharah at Jauharul Falah Al-Islami Islamic Boarding School operates as a recurrent institutional performance cycle rather than a one-time speaking exercise. The available interviews indicate that protected scheduling, rotating roles, peer-mentor support, rehearsal, collective feedback, and recognition create conditions in which female students can practise

public communication and report stronger confidence, clearer delivery, and greater responsibility. Program continuity is challenged by anxiety, memorization demands, limited time, competing activities, weather, and power interruptions. The principal improvement need is a staged pedagogy that preserves religious and rhetorical preparation while progressively reducing dependence on full-text memorization. A concise formative rubric and stronger longitudinal documentation would make Muhadharah a more measurable, gender-responsive platform for educational participation, psychosocial confidence, and community-facing communication.

LIMITATIONS

This article is limited by the evidence supplied. The corpus contains three role-specific interview records and an observation instrument, but not completed observation field notes, performance rubrics, attendance records, or a larger set of student interviews. The findings are therefore analytical descriptions of institutional practice and perceived experience, not estimates of effectiveness or prevalence. Data saturation was neither designed nor demonstrated, and no causal comparison can be made. The school-based context is also distinctive; transferability depends on how other Islamic boarding schools organize gender arrangements, mentoring, facilities, language use, and public-performance traditions. These limitations should guide future research toward multi-participant longitudinal designs that combine qualitative accounts with transparent performance indicators.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

E.S. conceptualized the study, designed the research, conducted data collection, performed the initial analysis, and drafted the manuscript. R.J. contributed to methodological refinement and data interpretation and critically reviewed and revised the manuscript for important intellectual content. Both authors approved the final version and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

"The authors declare no conflict of interest."

DECLARATION OF USE OF AI IN SCIENTIFIC WRITING

The authors used ChatGPT solely for language refinement and editorial assistance during manuscript preparation. The authors subsequently reviewed, verified, and revised the content and assume full responsibility for the final manuscript.

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