

ENHANCING SELF-CONFIDENCE CHARACTER AND LANGUAGE SKILLS THROUGH THEMATIC DISCUSSION IN GRADE 5 OF PONDOK MODERN DARUSSALAM GONTOR

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Abstract

Character education and official language mastery constitute two fundamental pillars of the curriculum at Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor (PMDG). This study aims to analyze how the thematic discussion method enhances the self-confidence character and language skills of Grade 5 Kulliyatul Mu'allimin Al-Islamiyah (KMI) students at PMDG. The research employed a descriptive qualitative case study involving Grade 5 KMI students and language instructors as the research participants. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and classroom documentation, then analyzed using the interactive model of data analysis consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing with triangulation to ensure credibility. The findings reveal that thematic discussion provides an authentic communicative learning environment that encourages students to express ideas confidently while consistently using Arabic and English as official languages. Students demonstrated noticeable improvements in self-confidence, willingness to participate in discussions, clarity of verbal expression, vocabulary use, and speaking fluency. The integration of thematic content with structured language practice also fostered leadership attitudes, critical thinking, and effective communication. The main contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that thematic discussion functions not only as a language learning strategy but also as an effective character education approach that simultaneously develops self-confidence and communicative competence within an Islamic boarding school context. These findings offer a practical pedagogical model for Islamic educational institutions seeking to integrate character development with foreign language instruction.

Keywords: Character Education; Self-Confidence; Thematic Discussion; Modern Islamic Boarding School; Language Skills.

Introduction

Character education has become one of the main priorities of educational systems in responding to the demands of the twenty-first century, where students are expected not only to possess academic competence but also strong personal character, communication skills, and the confidence to participate actively in society. Within Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), character education is embedded in every aspect of students' daily lives and learning activities, making it an integral component of the educational process rather than a complementary program (Hidayat & Aziz, 2022). Among the essential character traits developed in this environment, self-confidence plays a decisive role because it enables students to communicate ideas effectively, participate in discussions, and prepare themselves for leadership responsibilities and Islamic da'wah.

Despite continuous efforts to improve students' language competence, many students still experience hesitation and anxiety when expressing opinions in public. This condition indicates that language mastery alone does not automatically produce confident speakers. Students require learning experiences that simultaneously develop communicative competence and psychological readiness to speak before others. Therefore, instructional approaches that integrate character formation with language learning are increasingly needed, particularly in

educational environments where oral communication constitutes an important element of daily academic life.

Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor (PMDG) provides a distinctive educational context because Arabic and English function as official languages used in both formal learning and everyday communication. This bilingual environment encourages students to continuously practice speaking while internalizing discipline, responsibility, and leadership values. For Grade 5 students of Kulliyatul Mu'allimin Al-Islamiyah (KMI), language proficiency becomes increasingly important because they are preparing for greater academic responsibilities and leadership roles before entering their final year. Consequently, learning methods that actively engage students in meaningful communication are essential.

One instructional strategy that supports these objectives is thematic discussion. Through discussions based on relevant and challenging topics, students are encouraged to express arguments, respond to different opinions, solve problems collaboratively, and communicate systematically using the official languages. Such learning activities provide authentic opportunities to strengthen speaking ability while simultaneously cultivating self-confidence, critical thinking, and interpersonal communication skills (Nur & Fadlan, 2023; Rohman, 2024).

Previous studies have consistently reported that discussion-based learning improves students' critical thinking, classroom participation, and language achievement (Nasir et al., 2021). Nevertheless, these studies have generally concentrated on cognitive learning outcomes in regular schools. Only limited attention has been given to how thematic discussion simultaneously develops students' self-confidence and language skills within the distinctive educational culture of a modern Islamic boarding school, where language use is regulated as part of students' daily discipline. This context presents unique learning dynamics that cannot be fully explained by findings from conventional school settings.

Accordingly, the research gap addressed in this study is the limited empirical evidence regarding the dual role of thematic discussion as both a language learning strategy and a character education approach in pesantren. Existing studies rarely examine how structured thematic discussions conducted in Arabic and English contribute simultaneously to students' self-confidence and communicative competence in an integrated educational environment.

Based on this gap, this study aims to analyze how thematic discussion enhances the self-confidence character and language skills of Grade 5 KMI students at Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor. The novelty of this research lies in examining the simultaneous development of character and language competence through thematic discussion within a bilingual Islamic boarding school context, thereby extending existing literature that has predominantly examined these two aspects separately or within conventional educational settings. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of character-based language learning models that can be adapted by Islamic educational institutions seeking to strengthen both students' personal character and communicative competence

Table 1. Research Originality and Novelty

No.	Researcher & Year	Research Focus
1.	Zarkasyi et al. (2021)	Dynamics of the official language environment (Arabic/English) in PMDG Gontor in general.
2.	Hidayat & Aziz (2022)	Internalization of character values in language learning at Islamic schools/madrasahs.
3.	Nur & Fadlan (2023)	Collaborative learning and character building in modern Islamic boarding schools.
4.	Rohman (2024)	Debate methods to reduce communication apprehension.
5.	This Research (2026)	Enhancing Self-Confidence Character and Language Skills Through Thematic Discussion in Grade 5 of PMDG.

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach using a case study design to obtain an in-depth understanding of how thematic discussion enhances students' self-confidence character and language skills within the educational setting of Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor (PMDG) (Creswell & Poth, 2024). The research was conducted at the Central Campus of PMDG, Ponorogo, Indonesia, focusing on Grade 5 students of Kulliyatul Mu'allimin Al-Islamiyah (KMI). A case study design was selected because it enables a comprehensive exploration of educational practices within their natural context.

The research participants were selected through purposive sampling based on predetermined inclusion criteria. The participants consisted of Grade 5 KMI students who regularly participated in thematic discussion activities and demonstrated consistent involvement in the official language program, as well as teachers (asatidz) responsible for facilitating classroom discussions and supervising students' language development. Students were selected based on their active participation in classroom discussions, while teachers were chosen because of their direct experience in observing students' academic performance and character development throughout the learning process (Sugiyono, 2022). Data collection continued until information saturation was achieved, where no substantially new information emerged from additional participants.

Data were collected using three complementary techniques: participant observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Participant observation was conducted over approximately eight weeks during regularly scheduled thematic discussion sessions. The researcher observed students' verbal interactions, confidence in expressing opinions, participation intensity, use of Arabic and English as official languages, eye contact, voice projection, and responses to peer feedback. Field notes were recorded immediately after each observation session to preserve contextual details.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted individually with selected teachers and students using an interview guide that allowed flexibility to explore participants' experiences while maintaining consistency across interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 30–60 minutes and explored participants' perceptions of thematic discussion, the development of self-confidence, challenges in using the official languages, and changes in communication skills observed during the learning process (Nasir et al., 2021). All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Document analysis complemented the observational and interview data by examining lesson plans, discussion guidelines, language program documents, students' discussion assessment records, and daily language activity reports. These documents were used to verify findings obtained from observations and interviews and to provide additional contextual information regarding the implementation of thematic discussion.

Data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), consisting of four interconnected stages: data collection, data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. During data condensation, interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were coded and categorized according to recurring themes related to self-confidence and language skills. The categorized data were then organized into matrices and narrative displays to facilitate pattern identification. Finally, conclusions were continuously verified by comparing evidence across different data sources and refining interpretations throughout the analysis process.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed several validation strategies, including source triangulation, method triangulation, member checking, and prolonged engagement in the research setting. Source triangulation was achieved by comparing information obtained from students, teachers, observations, interviews, and institutional documents. Member checking was conducted by asking several participants to review the accuracy of interview interpretations, while prolonged observation enabled the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of participants' natural behaviors during thematic discussion activities. These procedures enhanced the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the research findings.

Table 2. Research Participants

No.	Research Participants	Role	Code	Number
1.	Class 5	Main participants	S1-S12	12
2.	Teachers	Facilitator of thematic discussions	T1-T3	3
3.	Researcher	Planner, observer, data collector, and analyzer	1	1
4.	Homeroom Teacher	Provides supporting	H1	1

Data analysis was performed using an interactive model consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification (Miles et al., 2019). To guarantee data validity (trustworthiness), this study applied triangulation of techniques and sources (Yin, 2023). This was achieved by comparing data from classroom observations with interview results and relevant documents regarding language competency standards at KMI Gontor. This approach ensures that the research findings truly reflect the dynamics of character education occurring in the field.

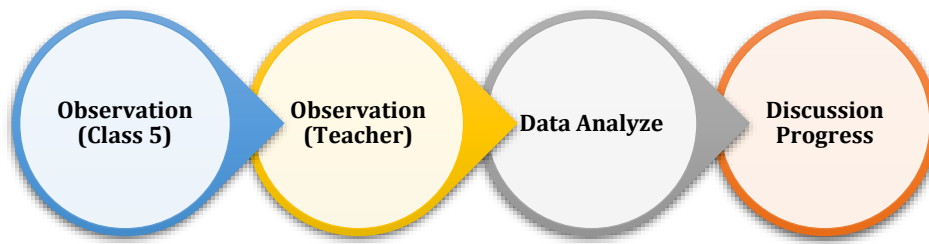


Figure 1. Research Method

Result and Discussion

The research results show that the implementation of thematic discussions in Grade 5 KMI Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor provides a significant impact on two main aspects: strengthening self-confidence character and increasing language self-efficacy. Based on observations, students are not only required to master thematic materials (such as Tarikh Islam or Fiqh), but must also be able to defend arguments spontaneously using Arabic or English. This aligns with the concept of "learning by doing" which is the soul of education in Gontor, where mental courage is formed through systematic environmental pressure (Zarkasyi et al., 2021).

The author received the following feedback from a discussion activity facilitator: "Through these discussions, the students can develop their opinions and ideas in a proper and appropriate manner. These discussions are also grounded in the boarding school's motto of "freedom," ensuring that their thinking is not restricted so they can explore new knowledge."

Internalization of Self-Confidence Character

Students' self-confidence character increases through the "podium responsibility" mechanism in group discussions. Students who initially had high communication anxiety gradually began to show emotional stability when expressing opinions. A study by Ahmad & Nur (2022) confirms that a competitive yet supportive boarding school environment is capable of reducing social anxiety in adolescents. In Gontor, this self-confidence is not merely the courage to speak, but the "courage to be right" based on a mature mastery of the material (Fatima & Ruslan, 2023).

Language Skills and Self-Efficacy

The improvement of language skills is visible in the aspects of fluency and diction accuracy. Thematic discussion forces students to search for technical vocabulary equivalents in the official language to explain complex concepts. This cognitive process strengthens memory retention toward new vocabulary. According to Mansyur (2024), active discussion is the most effective method in language teaching at Islamic institutions because it combines cognitive, affective, and psychomotor elements simultaneously. This phenomenon in Gontor is reinforced by strict language discipline, making classroom discussions the culmination of their daily language practice.

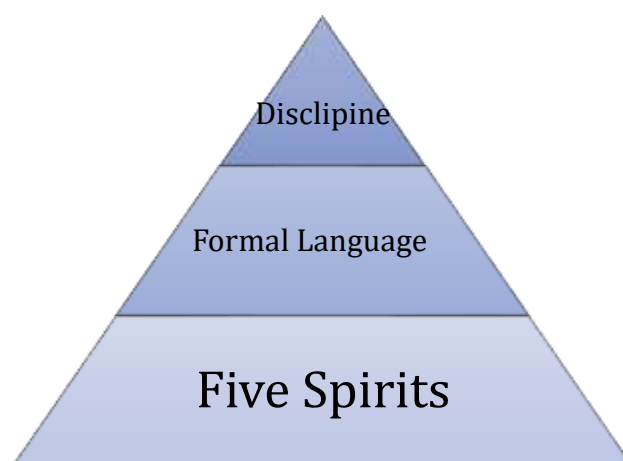


Figure 2. Input

Thematic Discussion as a Medium of Integration

The research results also found that thematic discussion functions as a bridge of integration between the values of Panca Jiwa (Five Spirits) and intellectual proficiency. The self-confidence that grows in discussions is directly proportional to the increase in the quality of students' leadership. This supports the findings in a Scopus journal by Rahman et al. (2025) which state that structured discussion methods in boarding-based institutions contribute greatly to the maturity of students' social character compared to conventional lecture methods.

The findings of this study confirm that thematic discussion at Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor (PMDG) is not merely an academic activity, but an effective socio-pedagogical instrument to transform student character. Discussions designed with the integration of official languages (Arabic and English) create a high-stakes environment condition that forces students to step out of their comfort zones. This is in line with social constructivism theory, which states that dialogic interaction within a structured environment accelerates the process of character value internalization and language mastery simultaneously (Hidayat & Aziz, 2022).

Synergy of Self-Confidence and Linguistic Efficacy

The increase in students' self-confidence during discussions is closely related to the concept of self-efficacy. When Grade 5 students are able to convey complex thematic ideas using a foreign language and receive positive feedback from peers and teachers, they build belief in their intellectual capabilities. Recent research by Nur and Fadlan (2023) shows that language practice based on problem-solving (such as thematic discussion) has a permanent impact on speaking courage compared to passive vocabulary memorization. In Gontor, this is reinforced by an atmosphere of "language discipline" that converts pressure into intrinsic motivation (Zarkasyi et al., 2021).

Character as an Output of Pesantren Education

This thematic discussion also reflects the implementation of leadership character, which is the graduate profile of Gontor. Students are not only required to win arguments, but must also maintain ethics of disagreement. This finding supports the study by Rahman et al. (2025) which states that Islamic educational institutions implementing open discussion methods tend to produce individuals with a higher level of intellectual tolerance. The language skills that improve during the discussion process become a tool for students to express these noble characters more articulately.

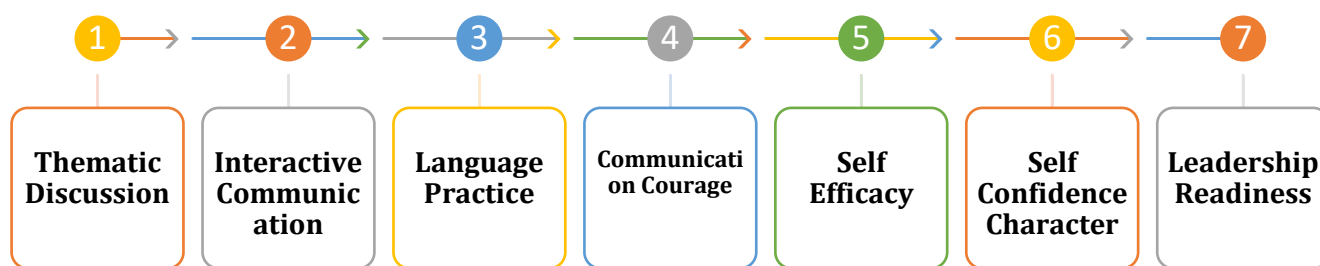


Figure 3. Diagram Thematic Discussion Framework

Theoretically, this research reinforces the argument that character education cannot be separated from a communicative context. Thematic discussion provides a "small stage" for Grade 5 students to practice becoming future leaders who are broad-minded and possess a strong mentality (Rohman, 2024). Practically, this method can be adopted by other educational institutions by adjusting to local contexts and the core values of each institution.

Table 3. Major Findings

Theme	Findings	Evidence
Self-confidence	Increased courage to speak	Observation & Interview
Language Fluency	Better vocabulary retrieval	Observation
Leadership Character	Ability to defend arguments ethically	Observation & Interview

Conclusion

This study concludes that thematic discussion in Grade 5 of Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor effectively enhances students' self-confidence and language proficiency by integrating academic content, official language practice, and pesantren values into a unified learning process. Through this approach, students become more confident in expressing ideas, improve their fluency in Arabic and English, and develop communication skills that support future leadership. The study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that thematic discussion serves not only as a language learning strategy but also as an effective approach to character education within an Islamic boarding school context. Its novelty lies in explaining how bilingual thematic discussions combined with pesantren values foster both communicative competence and self-confidence. This research is limited to a qualitative case study conducted in one grade level at PMDG. Future research is recommended to involve multiple Islamic boarding schools or employ quantitative and mixed-method approaches to further examine the relationship between thematic discussion, self-confidence, and language development across different educational contexts.

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