



Developing English Micro Habits to Support English Language Acquisition in a Pesantren-Based Elementary School MI Unggulan Mambaus Sholihin Blitar

Zuraida*, Intan Susana, Dyah Ayu Soffiya Zein

Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Tarbiyah (STIT) Misbahudin Ahmad Blitar

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.47134/pgsd.v3i2.2459>

*Correspondence: Zuraida

Email: aida.abdul.08@gmail.com

Received: 13-12-2025

Accepted: 14-01-2026

Published: 14-02-2026



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Abstract: English is not just a language for international communication, but a key tool that connects people, knowledge and opportunities in our interconnected world. Many Indonesians, including students in early education stage, are now faced with the need to master English language for the demands of the realization of Golden Indonesia 2045. Elementary school age is considered a critical period for acquiring a second or foreign language. Framed within a descriptive qualitative method, this research investigated how small but consistent English language practices are developed in students' daily routine recognized with their unique religious and cultural environment in a pesantren setting to enhance their English proficiency. The data of the study were collected through certain ways including classroom instructions observations, in-depth interviews with the teachers, and documentation of the students learning activities. The analysis focused on describing the implementation strategies and contextual factors that influence the success of micro habit development in an Islamic elementary boarding school. Findings indicates that micro habits-such as greetings, classroom instruction, simple conversations, vocabulary repetition- within a pesantren based elementary school contributes to students' engagement, vocabulary acquisition, students' motivation and confidence in using English in simple but authentic context. The integration of pesantren culture and discipline embedded in students' daily routine also donates valuable implication in promoting early English language acquisition. This research highlights the significant role of fostering micro habits in the development of language proficiency, emphasizing how such habits can serve as a crucial educational strategy for bridging the existing gaps in students' language skills. By integrating these small, consistent practices into their routines, educators can enhance the language acquisition process, ultimately improving the overall language skills of young learners, especially in culturally diverse environments like those found in *pesantren* schools.

Keywords: habit, young learner, language acquisition, pesantren-based education

Introduction

English proficiency is becoming crucial and essential in today's globalized world. English functions as *lingua franca* which becomes a shared language used for communication between individual or speakers of different native languages. Politics, international relations, travel and tourism, education and technology often use English language. It is a prove that English is not just a language for international communication, but a key tool that connects people, knowledge and opportunities in our interconnected world. English is the dominant language of the internet, science, and global business, further highlighting its importance as a global connector of people and knowledge (Crystal, 2003). Many people in Indonesia, are now faced with the need to master English language for the demands of Golden Indonesia 2045. Even, early education in the elementary school age children are learning English language. The Indonesian government has emphasized the importance of English language acquisition at an early age, as many elementary schools across the country have begun integrating English into their curricula to prepare young learners for the future. As reported by the Ministry of Education and Culture of Indonesia (2020), English language education is a cornerstone of the nation's educational reform to ensure students are equipped with the skills necessary to compete in the global job market. Thus, the growing demand for English proficiency in Indonesia underscores the need for effective language learning programs and strategies at all educational levels.

Elementary school age is considered a critical period for acquiring a second or foreign language. Language acquisition involves how children understand words, structure, meaning, and pragmatics or the social use of the language (Ninio, 1998). Research by Ellis (2008) highlights the importance of cognitive and social factors in shaping language learning, emphasizing the role of interaction in acquiring a second language. Acquiring a second language is a complex process shaped by various factors like motivation, cognitive abilities, prior experiences, the learner's first language, and their age. Several elements influence second language acquisition, including the age at which learning begins, the methods used, learners' attitudes and motivation, as well as individual characteristics (Liu, 2023). Among the many factors, age is significant factor in the process of second language acquisition, as it affects cognitive growth, language learning capacity, and the ability to achieve native-like pronunciation and fluency (Dey et al., 2024). As Krashen (1981) pointed out, younger learners have an advantage in acquiring a second language due to their heightened ability to absorb new linguistic information and mimic native speech patterns. In line with this, Siahaan (2022) stated that the critical period for acquiring a second language typically begins around age two and ends or concludes before puberty. During this period, the nervous system is highly responsive to environmental stimuli, allowing children to acquire language easily and fluently. Furthermore, Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle (1978) found that children who began learning a second language earlier were able to develop better accents and fluency compared to those who started later. The ability to achieve native-like fluency decreases significantly after this period of age.

Krashen (1982) supports early childhood language learning as he states in his theory, namely the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), children tend to learn language more

successfully and effectively than adults in a natural setting. Young learners also benefit more from exposure in less stressful environments, while adult learners perform better in a situated condition of learning. Students in an elementary school are categorized as the best photocopyers of adults whenever they are conditioned in the most natural setting where they can learn better without any feeling of stress. Aligned with the theory of CPH, Kusumawardani & Anjaniputra (2024) emphasize that language learning, which is started at an early age, has a good influence on every learner.

The inclusion of English as a global language is increasingly important for young learners in primary schools in Indonesia, given its position as a foreign language in the country and as an essential requirement in finding a job or getting higher-quality education. At the primary school level in Indonesia, English is neither taught nor made a compulsory subject for students (Lesia et al., 2022). However, according to many scholars, including Musthafa and Hamied (2018) in the research of Falah et al., (2023), have recommended making English compulsory, as several ASEAN member countries are increasingly prioritizing it. As English is no longer required as a mandatory subject at the primary level, schools now have the flexibility to develop their instructional approaches (Setyaningrum et al., 2023). Research by Sulistiyo et al., (2020) explains that the implementation of English in primary schools is uneven, with some schools offering it as elective local content and others emphasizing it more based on available resources and teacher qualifications.

In light of this, MI Unggulan Mamba'us Sholihin, an Islamic elementary pesantren-based school located in Blitar, East Java Province, applied English language teaching from the first grade of elementary school by implementing a program called "15-minute Language Class Program". They also use multi-lingual, Indonesian, Javanese, Arabic, and English for their daily classroom instruction.

Pesantren is a traditional Islamic educational institution that focuses on studying religious knowledge, emphasizing the moral development of students. Under the guidance of a kyai, students are expected to apply what they learn, with the yellow book (classical Islamic texts) serving as the primary reference and the mosque functioning as the core center of activities (Dhian Marita Sari, 2023). In organizing the educational programs, Pesantren Mambaus Sholihin adds foreign languages such as English and Arabic as their compulsory subject in addition to the secular sciences and Islamic teachings for all the educational levels in the pesantren, from preschool, kindergarten, elementary school, primary school, up to higher school.

The term habit is widely used to explain specific behavior. Habits are well-planned patterns of study that students regularly follow to enhance their comprehension of particular academic subjects (Suhana & Haryudin, 2017). Meanwhile, Clark (2000) defined habit as a repeatedly and automatically performed action. Moreover, micro habits are small routine actions to reach long-term objectives. Developing micro habits in language learning means paying attention to the small, daily choices that do much more to shape bigger outcomes. Micro habits are essential in the language learning process, as Duhigg (2012) argues that consistent small behaviors can trigger significant, lasting changes.

In the context of a pesantren environment, teaching and learning face many challenges. The study of Dhian Marita Sari (2023) identified several problems, including internal and external factors. Internal factors referred to teaching pedagogy competence dealing with classical teaching, which is still often used, the low motivation of the students, and pesantren identity, which addresses Islamic values that have not yet been incorporated into the process of learning. While external factors encompass limited textbooks and learning resources, the lack of teachers' competence in all English skills, and classroom management. The study of Dhian Marita Sari (2023) also suggests some potential strategies for pesantren English teachers covering the use of varied instructional strategies such as read aloud, translation, group work, and silent reading, the provision of inspiring stories and preaching by teachers and parents, and the incorporation of Islamic values into the learning process.

MI Unggulan Mambaus Sholihin Blitar, as an educational institution under a pesantren, promotes the use of foreign languages for communication on the day appointed. The institution is located in somehow remote area which is far from the noise of the city. Yet, the institution is able to adapt its education toward the needs of current society by serving an integrated curriculum with affordable education rates compared to the other pesantrens, which accommodate almost the same curriculum. The study on the foreign language habituation by developing small but consistent activity is indeed very important.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research which was appropriate for gaining detailed insights into the implementation of English micro habits at MI Unggulan Mambaus Sholihin Blitar, the strategies and factors affected. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with the principal, classroom teachers, and the 4th-grade students who were selected using purposive sampling. The data were also obtained from classroom instruction observation and documentation.

The data were analyzed following a thematic analysis involving data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusion (Miles & Huberman, 2014). Meanwhile, the validity of the data was ensured using data triangulation, member checking, and prolonged engagement in the field of study. The study was also carried out systematically by following the appropriate steps in qualitative research and reported in detail, explicit, systematic, and trusted description of the research findings to ensure the credibility and reliability of the research.

Result and Discussion

The result of observation and interview indicates that students were able to gradually establish a small but consistent routine related to English learning. The school is consistent in developing activities for students to develop their English language acquisition. The English language activity is settled every day except Friday. Every morning, the students, under the guidance of the teacher, do English activities with various topics based on the schedule arranged on the workbook prepared by the school.

Once the students arrive at school, teachers greet them in the front gate by performing salam, assalamua'laikum, and good morning. This builds the students' awareness before

classroom teaching and prepares them to follow the activities at the school during the day. Teacher greetings continue in the classroom during the first period, when students follow classroom instruction.

The school principal in the interview said that “Every morning before classes begin, teachers line up and are ready to welcome children at the outside the front gate of school by greeting them with a warm hello, good morning, and welcome to school as soon as they set foot on the school grounds. We do this as a form of maximum service to our students and to prepare them for learning at school.” (IP-Q1-23/06/25)

The result of the study is in line with the empirical evidence reported in the Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis which demonstrates that the practice of greeting students at the beginning of each day contributes to increased levels of student engagement. Furthermore, educators have noted that routine classroom greetings are associated with improvements in student behavior, the establishment of a more positive learning environment, and the cultivation of a stronger sense of community within the classroom (Allday & Pakurar, 2007).

Allday & Pakurar (2007) continue the act of welcoming students on the first day of school, and consistently as they enter throughout the academic year, extend beyond a mere social courtesy. It constitutes a proactive classroom management strategy that promotes preventative discipline and facilitates the development of a constructive classroom culture in which learners are attentive, motivated, and collaborative. The following eight considerations highlight how daily greetings function as an effective practice for fostering a successful classroom climate.

Students are exposed to the English vocabulary from Monday to Saturday, except on Friday. Every morning, they experience 15 minutes of English language habituation. The program is called “15 Minutes Language Class Program”. The students learn vocabulary, simple conversation, short reading, and writing with topics ranging from general knowledge to Islamic teaching values. The school compiled the materials on its own from various resources. In the 15-minute duration of language habituation, the teacher, together with the students, do different activities including vocabulary repetition, simple conversation, short writing, and English reading aloud.

The 4th-grade English teacher explained in the interview, “We create the English, Arabic, and Javanese workbook for our students by compiling the material from many trusted resources. We designed the curriculum for grades 1 to 6. Every grade has its own learning goals. The topics varied from general to Islamic teaching values. We continuously improve the workbook, and we let the teacher to use additional sources whenever they need to do so” (IT-Q1-22/06/25)

From the observation, the material for language learning is always typed in three languages: English, Arabic, and Javanese. The topics include daily greetings, morning/closing prayers, simple classroom conversation, such as asking for toilet permission, asking the teacher, borrowing, etc. Meanwhile, reading activity is always integrated with the activity of writing. Students read aloud the simple conversation and

passage in the workbook. The topics continue into simple writing, such as writing about students' identity, hobbies, address, daily routine, etc.

The result of the interview, observation, and documentation showed that the school allowed the students to learn a foreign language contextually. In theory, this is referred to as the Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) method, which is grounded in the constructivist approach, linking the subject matter to students' real-world experiences (Rohana et al., 2025). Learning allows students to relate the subject matter to things they do everyday. Students learn something that is daily related to them. It resulted in meaningful learning where students can directly practice the language that they already have the background knowledge on them. Structured daily language habituation, which is contextually based, promotes better learning for students. The study of Yusyac et al. (2021) also showed that learning content connected to the real-world situation brings meaning in the learning that can strive to attain learning goals.

15 minutes every day of language learning shows great effects of the micro habit on the improvement of students' foreign language acquisition. Frequent English routine yields several positive outcomes, such as minimizing feelings of awkwardness, motivating the students to use target language without any fear of making mistakes, enhancing students' speaking proficiency through peer interaction, enriching vocabulary development, boosting self-confidence. The finding confirms the result of the study of Sholihah et al. (2023), which found that frequent practice reduces awkwardness and strengthens students' language skills.

The 15-minute language class program can run effectively with the support of several factors. First, the class runs naturally, where the students are experiencing learning both inside and outside the classroom. Learning activity is not only carried out in the classroom but also outside the classroom, such as at the school yard, gazebo, and school hall. The findings of the present study validate that variations in the learning setting are essential since environmental conditions are significant in shaping the emotional factors of students during learning a foreign language (Luo, 2024).

Second, the teacher's competence has a great influence on teaching strategy. Teachers who mostly have no specialty in English language teaching continuously improve their foreign language competence by inviting English experts to train the teachers. The trainer coaches the teachers on how to deliver the English materials in an effective way. Moreover, in compiling the materials or workbook, teachers collaborate with the English lecturer to create learning content that is contextually based and appropriate with the students' needs. Puspitaningtyas & Jasmina (2023) state that teacher's qualifications play vital role to make sure the learning process runs optimally. This aligns with findings from Tupamahu et al., (2025) who found that teachers' professional development programs are crucial in enhancing teachers' knowledge and improving student engagement and achievement in language learning. In a similar vein, research by Asiyah et al., (2021) highlighted that professional development for teachers leads to more effective teaching strategies, enhancing students' language acquisition in both formal and informal settings. Moreover, Sulastri et

al. (2020) emphasize that teacher collaboration with experts in the field is essential to ensure the learning materials are up-to-date, relevant, and aligned with students' learning needs.

Third, the culture of pesantren embed in students daily live also promotes big impact on the process of language learning. Pesantren culture plays a significant role in shaping students' English language learning. The tradition of discipline and obedience to teachers fosters consistency in study habits, allowing students to practice language in a structured manner. The communal learning environment, where students live and study together, creates authentic opportunities for daily interaction using English since pesantren implement a "language area" policy.

Traditional methods which is still used such as vocabulary drill and repetition further strengthen reading and listening skills as well as vocabulary master through direct engagement with source materials. Moreover, the religious and moral values emphasized in pesantren—such as patience, perseverance, and sincerity—motivate students to persist in the challenging process of language acquisition. Collectively, these cultural practices not only enhance linguistic competence but also foster confidence and autonomy in communication.

The research of Adib et al., (2024) showed that in the context of learning English as a foreign language, learner identity holds a crucial role in the process of adapting to the target language. Recognizing learners' identities provides insight into how their cultural backgrounds shape their lives, values, and perspectives. Learners' cultural backgrounds enable them to connect their lived experiences to the process of English language learning. Learners' cultural backgrounds also play a role in fostering motivation and enthusiasm toward the target language, which in turn contributes to the achievement of positive English foreign language learning outcomes.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that structured and consistent routines, such as the 15 Minutes Language Class Program, have a significant impact on students' foreign language acquisition. Daily exposure to English through greetings, vocabulary practice, conversation, reading, and writing enables students to gradually build micro-habits that strengthen their confidence, motivation, and language proficiency.

The integration of contextual and meaningful content, aligned with students' daily lives and supported by teacher guidance, contributes to the effectiveness of the program. Moreover, the collaboration between teachers, experts, and the school in preparing instructional materials ensures that language learning remains relevant and continuously improved.

In addition, the broader school and pesantren culture powerfully reinforces the success of language learning. The values of discipline, communal living, and obedience to teachers establish a learning environment that encourages consistency, engagement, and authentic practice. Together with teacher competence and institutional support, these cultural and pedagogical practices create a holistic ecosystem where students can acquire English in a natural, meaningful, and sustainable manner.

Future research should explore the long-term effects of structured language programs like the 15 Minutes Language Class on language retention and academic performance, as well as the role of technology in enhancing delivery. Comparing cultural and institutional settings can help identify universal strategies for global adoption. Practically, educators should integrate relevant content, personalize teaching based on students' interests, and ensure ongoing professional development. Collaboration among all stakeholders is key to maintaining program effectiveness and supporting students' language acquisition and personal growth.

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