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English-Speaking Habituation among EFL Students in Indonesian Pesantren: A Vygotskian ZPD Perspective

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Abstract

This study investigates the process of English-speaking habituation among EFL students in a pesantren (Islamic boarding school) in East Java, Indonesia. Recognizing the growing importance of English in global communication, the research explores how pesantren-based programs support students in developing practical speaking skills within a religious and socio-cultural context. Using an exploratory case study design and rely on Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, data were collected through institutional documents, interviews with curriculum administrators, and participatory observation at the Foreign Language Development Institute (LPBA) of Pondok Pesantren Nurul Jadid. Findings reveal that structured initiatives such as Native Day and Level Mentoring play a crucial role in fostering immersion, peer-led learning, and confidence in using English. Students demonstrated adaptive strategies for negotiating meaning in English while managing interference from local languages like Madurese and Indonesian. The study highlights how consistency, learner autonomy, and institutional support contribute significantly to speaking proficiency. These insights offer practical implications for designing culturally responsive English curricula tailored to Islamic educational settings, reinforcing the need for pedagogical models that integrate language acquisition with students' lived religious experiences.

Keywords: EFL, English speaking, pesantren, language habituation, sociocultural learning, learner autonomy

Introduction

The Foreign Language Development Institute (Lembaga Pengembangan Bahasa Asing, LPBA) of Nurul Jadid is an informal educational institution under the auspices of the Nurul Jadid Islamic Boarding School (Pondok Pesantren Nurul Jadid). This institute focuses on the development of international languages, particularly Arabic and English. Through this institution, pesantren not only plays a significant role in shaping students' religious character but also increasingly emphasizes the urgency of equipping them with communicative competencies in foreign languages, especially English. The dynamics of globalization and the growing intensity of intercultural interactions demand that pesantren students possess broader language competencies to enable them to compete in various sectors, including education and employment. As an international language, English serves as an essential medium of communication, and many Islamic boarding schools have incorporated English language programs (Dumiyati et al., 2023); (Sari, 2023); & (Sofi, 2025), especially to enhance students' knowledge and expand their access to global sources of information (Suryanti et al., 2023); (Suryanti et al., 2024); (Samheri & Hajad, 2023); (Rizqi, 2023); (Sofyan et al., 2024); & (Suryanti et al., 2024).

In pesantren, students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) face unique challenges due to the presence of pesantren-specific linguistic registers that differ from standard English usage (Sofyan et al., 2022); (Intania & Nurcholis, 2024); (Andriani & Zumala, 2024); (Asfar, 2024); & (Sariono, et al., 2025). One such example at Pondok Pesantren Nurul Jadid is the term "*hadiran*", a borrowed term from the Indonesian language, used to refer to a religious activity conducted between Maghrib and Isha prayer times. Such expressions are embedded in students' linguistic habits and may influence their understanding and use of English. This phenomenon highlights the necessity for English language instruction to consider the social and cultural context of the pesantren in order to effectively support students' communicative needs (Duff, 2007; Duff, 2010; (Karuru et al., 2023); & (Merizawati et al., 2023). English language education in Islamic boarding schools should not merely focus on conventional instruction of grammar and linguistic structures but must also address the practical use of language in everyday communication. Santri (students) are situated within a context where their use of English must align with their lived experiences, shaped by Islamic values and pesantren traditions. Therefore, there is a need for a pedagogical approach that accommodates the unique communicative needs of pesantren students without undermining their linguistic identity that has been shaped within the pesantren environment (Naufal Irsyadi & Allim, 2023) & (Fahriany & Wahyunengsih, 2025).

The discourse on Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) and foreign language development is not a novel topic. However, it becomes particularly compelling when examined through a case study approach, as such an approach can uncover distinctive characteristics, learning processes, developmental trajectories, and potentially undiscovered phenomena absent from broader populations or prior research. Earlier studies have primarily focused on the integration of pesantren-based values into English language learning, such as Millah (2019), who explored the adoption of pesantren learning into English education. Other research, such as that by Zulaikah (2019), investigated the application of various teaching methods including the VAT (Visualization, Auditory, Kinesthetic) approach, while Perlina et al. (2022) discussed the implementation of Collaborative Learning models. Additional studies have concentrated on the

development of training models to enhance students' English language skills, such as the work of Rofi'i et al. (2023) and Saksono et al. (2023), as well as the use of supportive activities like English Fun Learning reported by Ahmada et al. (2023).

Despite the valuable contributions of these six studies, none of them has specifically addressed the existence of dormitories or institutional spaces within pesantren dedicated to the development of students' English communication skills, nor have they investigated how students negotiate communicative meaning through pesantren-specific linguistic registers when using English. In our view, the dormitory in our research setting is intended to create a focused environment for the learning and development of foreign languages, particularly English, providing students with a dedicated and context-specific space for language acquisition. This study aims to address that gap by examining two core aspects, namely the strategies employed to habituate students to use English in daily interactions, and the ways students negotiate meaning using pesantren-specific registers within English conversations. By focusing on the LPBA at Pondok Pesantren Nurul Jadid, this research offers insights into how structured institutional programs, learner autonomy, and peer collaboration can shape the process of English-speaking habituation. The findings are intended to inform the development of culturally responsive EFL curricula in Islamic educational contexts.

Zone of Proximal Development

The concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), developed by Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978), offers a powerful framework for understanding the social nature of language acquisition, especially within institutional and peer-driven contexts. Vygotsky defines the ZPD as the distance between what a learner can do independently and what they can achieve with the guidance of a more knowledgeable other. Within this zone, learning occurs through social interaction, scaffolding, and collaborative dialogue, emphasizing that cognitive development is not merely an individual process but one that is inherently social and culturally mediated (Lantolf et al., 2015; Lantolf et al., 2020; Lantolf & Poehner, 2011). This theory is particularly relevant to second or foreign language learning, where learners often rely on external support to bridge linguistic gaps. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), the ZPD highlights how learners can gradually internalize language forms and functions through meaningful communication with peers, mentors, or instructors who provide targeted assistance. Scaffolding temporary support that is gradually removed as learners gain competence is a central instructional strategy derived from this framework (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976; van de Pol et al., 2010).

In pesantren-based English programs, such as the one investigated in this study, the ZPD is observable in structured mentoring relationships and peer-based activities. For example, the Level Mentoring program allows more proficient students (from Intermediate or Advanced levels) to support Elementary-level students in improving their speaking skills. These mentoring activities exemplify the ZPD in action: learners are exposed to more complex language structures, pronunciation models, and communicative strategies through social interaction with capable peers. Over time, these learners internalize the language patterns they first encountered in assisted contexts, gradually achieving autonomous language use (Ohta, 2001). Moreover, the concept of the ZPD aligns closely with the pesantren tradition of santri learning from senior santri or teachers within the community. This structure creates a natural environment for dialogic

learning, where knowledge and practices are transmitted across experience levels. The Native Day program, where English is mandated for daily communication, also operates within the ZPD framework by creating real-time opportunities for students to stretch their current abilities with support from peers or institutional norms. Understanding speaking habituation through the lens of the ZPD underscores the importance of socially supported learning and contextual interaction. Rather than viewing language acquisition as an isolated cognitive skill, the ZPD shifts the focus toward collaboration, mentorship, and meaningful participation within a learning community (Duff, 2007). This framework therefore provides a theoretical foundation for analyzing how pesantren students develop speaking proficiency in English through structured, culturally embedded support systems.

38 Method

This study employs a case study design with an exploratory approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018), conducted in the period of March – Mei 2025. The research locus is the English Institute, LPBA Nurul Jadid. LPBA Nurul Jadid is one of the informal educational institutions under the auspices of Pondok Pesantren Nurul Jadid. The institute focuses on the instruction of Arabic and English for students at the upper secondary education level. Within this institution, specific learning outcomes are set, particularly in the domain of speaking skills. At the Elementary level, students are expected to be able to pronounce and communicate using basic vocabulary within a three-month period. At the Intermediate level, students are expected to apply grammatical knowledge acquired during both the Elementary and Intermediate levels in their spoken communication. At the Advanced level, students are expected to actualize their linguistic knowledge and skills through engagement in extracurricular activities, such as participating in competitions. In this study, data sources are categorized into two types: primary data and supporting data. The primary data consist of the institutional curriculum and the list of activities designed to enhance language skills. The supporting data include conversations among students in the dormitory, interactions between students and dormitory supervisors, and conversations among students outside the dormitory. The primary data are collected through interviews with the Curriculum Division, while the supporting data are obtained through participatory observation. The analysis of primary data is conducted using the observation method with note-taking techniques. Meanwhile, the analysis of supporting data involve open coding and theoretical triangulation, in which the data are formulated and examined in relation to relevant theories in order to identify potential gaps between the research findings and existing theoretical frameworks.

Results 26

Based on the findings of this study and direct interviews with the Curriculum Division, it was revealed that the activities conducted at the English Language Institute primarily emphasize the mastery of speaking skills. One of the core practices is peer discussion on specific topics, where one student is designated as the main speaker tasked with presenting arguments, another student responds to the arguments, and a third student delivers a concluding summary. These sessions typically take place in the afternoon following formal academic classes. In addition to peer discussions, other extracurricular speaking activities include public speaking, debates, storytelling, and news reading, which are generally conducted in the evening before the start of

evening classroom instruction. However, among these activities, two specific programs i.e., Native Day and Level Mentoring, were found to be particularly noteworthy and promising as models for English language instruction within the pesantren context.

Native Day: Immersive English Use

Native Day is a weekly initiative held at the institute and aimed at promoting the use of native or mother tongue languages in daily interactions within the campus environment (Lyster, 2007; Swain & Lapkin, 1998). The activity is conducted over a span of three days, from Saturday to Monday each week. During this period, students are given the opportunity to actively engage in the use of English in a native-like manner. The primary objective of this initiative is to habituate students to using English as it is commonly employed by native speakers, to minimize the interference of the mother tongue in foreign language use, and to cultivate a natural habit of speaking in English (Cahyani et al., 2018; Fauziati et al., 2020). In the context of this study, interference typically occurs through the insertion of elements from the Madurese and Indonesian languages into English sentence structures. An example of such interference is as follows:

A : “e there is Mr. Naufal. Hurry up e!” → e ada Pak Naufal. Cepat e!

The phoneme /e/ exhibits allophonic variations in both the Indonesian and Madurese languages. Interestingly, the function of the phoneme /e/ can vary depending on communicative needs and its corresponding allophonic realizations (Fauziati et al., 2020). Within the context of the Native Day activity, students’ courage, adaptability, and self-confidence are put to the test. They are not only expected to speak and interact in native-like English with peers at the same level but are also encouraged to engage with students at higher proficiency levels. This study reveals that practicing English language skills with peers who possess higher levels of proficiency can stimulate learners’ confidence and enhance their productive English abilities prior to engaging in conversations with native speakers. Interestingly, based on the information obtained, students at this institution were also able to communicate effectively in English with native speakers who visited their pesantren and educational institution. Fundamentally, when communication is established and both the speaker and interlocutor engage in mutual exchange, their utterances can be understood by one another.

To instill discipline and reinforce language immersion, sanctions are imposed on students who use code-mixed or code-blended speech involving English and either Indonesian or their local languages (Cahyani et al., 2018; Macaro, 2009; Sert, 2005). Students at the Intermediate and Advanced levels are tasked with monitoring the use of native English among their peers and juniors. These sanctions are generally enforced in the evenings, a transitional period between pesantren activities and dormitory routines. The penalties vary in form, including vocabulary memorization, delivering speeches in English, and storytelling exercises.

Through this activity, students are expected to acquire the following insights:

1. The distinction between English and their mother tongue.
2. The difference between native-like English and dialectally influenced English (interference).
3. The formal structures of English that align with established grammatical norms.

4. The willingness to speak English with proficient speakers.

The Native Day program significantly supports the achievement of speaking proficiency as outlined in the institute's learning objectives. Based on interview data, each level within the institution has differentiated competency targets for Speaking classes (Storch, 2002; Kim & McDonough, 2008). At the Elementary level, students are expected to recognize and accurately pronounce English vocabulary according to phonological rules. At the Intermediate level, they are expected to apply grammatical knowledge in oral communication. Meanwhile, at the Advanced level, students are encouraged to actualize their linguistic knowledge and skills through tangible activities such as participating in competitions, with guidance provided by designated instructors (Thornbury, 2005; Harmer, 2007). The achievement of English language skills varies across different learner levels due to the diverse experiences each learner brings to the classroom. At the Elementary level, engaging in 24 hours of English language instruction may be considerably challenging; thus, learning outcomes are primarily focused on accurate articulation and the use of basic sentence structures. This variation in language attainment allows speaking instructors to more easily determine appropriate teaching methods and materials. Notably, this flexibility contributes to greater time efficiency, especially given that each subject is allotted only one hour of instruction per week. Interestingly, the subjects taught are skill-based English language courses, such as Speaking I (Basic Speaking), Speaking II (Intermediate Speaking), and Speaking III (Advanced Speaking).

Level Mentoring: Peer Scaffolding

Level mentoring refers to a guidance activity conducted by students at higher levels than those at lower levels. This activity facilitates the intensification of knowledge and development of language skills and interests. Within the institutional cycle, the Elementary level is the only group required to receive mentoring from the two levels above it. This policy is implemented to ensure that students with limited English proficiency receive the necessary reinforcement (Watanabe & Swain, 2007), thereby providing them with equal opportunities to progress alongside peers who may have a stronger background in English. According to interview findings, mentoring sessions are conducted within each dormitory room at flexible times, determined by mutual agreement between the mentoring and mentee students. Elementary-level students are given the autonomy to request instruction on specific topics, such as how to construct coherent paragraphs, how to manage nervousness and hesitation during English-speaking activities, and other related subjects (Benson, 2011; Little, 2007). Throughout the implementation of this program, the Head of the Curriculum Division emphasized that speaking remains the most preferred language skill among students overall.

English is the sole language of communication during mentoring sessions, and the use of other languages is strictly prohibited. This activity serves as a platform for regeneration and transfer of knowledge and experience. Elementary-level students benefit by gaining insights from their mentors' experiences and linguistic knowledge, which, in turn, helps them align their learning with their personal goals and aspirations in acquiring and mastering specific English language skills. The learning scheme is designed to be mutual and collaborative. Learners and speakers of varying proficiency levels are encouraged to share their experiences and knowledge with those at lower levels. Moreover, the regulations imposed by the pesantren and affiliated

institutions, which restrict students' access to external environments, are intended to stabilize and maintain a focused learning atmosphere by minimizing external distractions. Nevertheless, students are provided with opportunities to enhance their knowledge and broaden their perspectives through controlled internet access during formal school hours, specifically from 08:00 AM to 02:00 PM.

Discussion

The findings of this study situate it within a niche in pesantren-based EFL research that, to the best of knowledge, has not been substantially addressed by prior work. As noted in the Introduction, six previous studies on pesantren and English language development (Millah, 2019; Zulaikah, 2019; Perlina et al., 2022; Rofi'i et al., 2023; Saksono et al., 2023; Ahmada et al., 2023) have largely focused on particular instructional models or training programs, yet have not examined two aspects that are central to this study: first, the existence of a dedicated institutional space, namely the dormitory; deliberately structured as a language habituation environment outside formal class hours; and second, the way students negotiate meaning when pesantren-specific register (e.g., terms such as *hadiran*) and elements of Madurese/Indonesian interfere with their English use. The novelty of this study, therefore, does not lie in the application of the ZPD framework itself (Lantolf et al., 2015; Lantolf & Poehner, 2011), which has been widely used in second language acquisition research (Lantolf & Aljaafreh, 1995; Watanabe, 2008), but in its application to two specific institutional programs (Native Day and Level Mentoring) as scaffolding mechanisms operating within a lived, rule-bound residential space shaped by the pesantren's religious and cultural norms.

In summary, this study found that English-speaking habituation at LPBA Nurul Jadid is sustained by two principal mechanisms: Native Day, which creates social pressure and authentic opportunities for speaking in conditions resembling native-speaker use, and Level Mentoring, which positions Intermediate- and Advanced-level students as a "more knowledgeable other" for Elementary-level students. Consistency of practice (both in frequency and duration of engagement with English) emerged as the factor linking both programs to gains in confidence and speaking fluency. At the same time, this study also identified points of friction: interference from Madurese and Indonesian (for instance, in the pronunciation of the /e/ phoneme) persisted despite strict rules and sanctions, and several Elementary-level students reportedly withdrew from the program due to discomfort with the rules or interpersonal communication barriers. These findings are relevant to readers in the field of pesantren-based English education because they show that the success of speaking habituation does not rest solely on curriculum design, but also on how social spaces, i.e., dormitories, mentoring sessions are managed to sustain ongoing scaffolding.

Our finding regarding Level Mentoring, in which higher-level students guide Elementary-level peers, is consistent with Watanabe (2008), who found that peer-to-peer interaction between L2 learners of differing proficiency levels enable more proficient learners to provide effective scaffolding for less proficient ones. This result also aligns with Leidenfrost et al. (2011), who found that peer mentoring styles contribute to mentees' academic success in higher education settings. This similarity is likely attributable to a shared underlying structure in both contexts: a scheduled mentor-mentee relationship, institutionally mandated yet relationally engaged, occurring within a closed community that allows for repeated interaction (Alzubi et al., 2024;

Leidenfrost et al., 2014). Because our context is a 24-hour residential setting, the intensity and frequency of mentor-mentee interaction is likely higher than in the university setting examined by Leidenfrost et al. (2011), which may explain why this pesantren reports relatively smooth knowledge transfer across levels (Yudiana & Famularsih, 2024; Sofi, 2025).

The interference of Madurese and Indonesian into students' English speech observed in this study shows a similar pattern to findings on code-switching in Indonesian EFL classrooms reported by Murtiningsih et al. (2022) and Patmasari, Agussatriana, and Kamaruddin (2022), who likewise found that Indonesian EFL learners consistently insert elements of their first language into target-language speech, particularly when target vocabulary or structures are not yet fully mastered. An important difference, however, is that in those studies, code-switching was largely tolerated or even leveraged as a scaffolding strategy by teachers. In our context, by contrast, similar interference is met with institutional sanctions (vocabulary memorization, storytelling, or speech assignments). This difference is likely influenced by differing programmatic objectives: the comparison studies were conducted in regular classrooms aimed at content comprehension, whereas Native Day at this pesantren is explicitly designed as a full-immersion space targeting the habituation of English use in everyday interaction rather than classroom comprehension alone. The lower tolerance for interference observed in our study therefore reflects a difference in program design rather than a fundamental difference in learners' underlying cognitive processes.

Our finding that consistent practice ²⁷ correlates with speaking fluency and confidence aligns with Ghafar's (2023) systematic review on the relationship between self-confidence and English communication skills, as well as with Al-Seghayer (2023), who linked foreign language mastery to competitive advantage in a globalized environment. This similarity is unsurprising given that our study and these references observe EFL/ESL learner populations in which instrumental motivation, access to education and employment, serves as a primary driver. What distinguishes our study is its unit of analysis: rather than treating consistency solely as an individual-level variable, we found that the pesantren institution actively structures this consistency through schedules, sanctions, and a system for reporting students' progress via a dedicated application; an institutional mechanism that has received comparatively little attention in consistency-focused language-learning literature, which tends to center on individual motivation.

The structural resemblance to the "learning society" model observed at Kampung Inggris Pare (Yulianingsih et al., 2020), as well as the long-term motivational challenges noted by Bennett (2017), remains relevant; however, the pesantren's religious context – which requires the English program to align with worship schedules and internal regulations – renders the autonomy available to learners more constrained than in the commercially oriented, time-flexible Kampung Inggris setting. This institutional difference, rather than a difference in underlying learning theory, appears to be the primary distinguishing factor.

Building on the comparisons above, this study's principal contribution to the field of pesantren-based English education is twofold. First, it extends the application of ZPD beyond formal classroom or tutor interaction—the setting of most prior ZPD-EFL studies—into non-classroom living spaces, namely dormitories and informal mentoring sessions (Chong & Reinders, 2020; Daflizar et al., 2022), demonstrating that scaffolding occurs not only in structured classroom-like interaction but also within institutionally organized daily routines.

Second, this study provides empirical documentation of how students negotiate meaning amid interference from local pesantren register and regional language (Madurese); a dimension not addressed in the six pesantren-EFL studies cited in the preliminary studies. This study offers an additional perspective: that successful English-speaking habituation in pesantren settings cannot be separated from how the institution manages the tension between students' local/religious linguistic identity and the demands of consistent target-language use.

These findings carry several implications. Academically, this study suggests that future ZPD research in pesantren-based EFL contexts should consider units of analysis beyond the classroom—including dormitories and other informal social spaces—as loci of scaffolding equally important to formal classroom settings (Duff, 2007; Duff, 2010). Practically, administrators of language programs at pesantren or similar Islamic educational institutions may consider tiered mentoring systems (such as Level Mentoring) as a relatively low-cost yet effective model for bridging proficiency gaps among students, with the caveat that sanctions for language interference should be accompanied by emotional support, given that this study also found that some students withdrew from the program due to discomfort with the rules. From a policy perspective, these findings are relevant to pesantren administrators and religious education policymakers seeking to design foreign language curricula that align with Islamic values without compromising the intensity of language acquisition (Intania & Nurcholis, 2024; Fahriany & Wahyunengsih, 2025; Andriani & Zumala, 2024). For future research, given this study's limitation as a single-site case study (Creswell & Poth, 2018), multi-site comparisons across pesantren with similar program designs would strengthen the generalizability of these findings, including further investigation into the long-term effects of local register interference on students' English fluency after graduation.

Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the importance of contextually grounded strategies for enhancing English-speaking proficiency among pesantren students. Through the implementation of institutionally supported programs such as Native Day and Level Mentoring, students are provided with structured opportunities to engage in authentic English communication while remaining within the socio-religious framework of the pesantren. These initiatives foster not only linguistic competence but also self-confidence, adaptability, and consistency – factors that are crucial to second language acquisition (MacIntyre & Doucette, 2010; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). A critical component of successful language acquisition in this setting is consistency – the degree to which students regularly engage with English both in and out of structured learning times (Horwitz et al., 1986). Sustained practice and exposure to the language, coupled with institutional encouragement and reinforcement, lead to measurable improvements in fluency and confidence. However, the study also identifies internal and institutional challenges, such as students' discomfort with rules or interpersonal communication difficulties, which may hinder progress and should be addressed through more flexible pedagogical strategies. In conclusion, pesantren-based language education can be highly effective when it integrates immersive, collaborative, and context-sensitive approaches. These findings offer valuable implications for developing English curricula in similar Islamic educational institutions, ensuring both linguistic advancement and cultural alignment.

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