



INTERNATIONAL DAY PROGRAM AS A MEDIUM FOR ENGLISH SKILL DEVELOPMENT IN STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS

Amelia Resti Iffadah¹, Fibra Aura Tasyani², Cep Ahmad Rifa'i³, Ida Masayu Putri⁴

State Islamic University of Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang

ameliaarestiiffadah@gmail.com, arbify4@gmail.com, cepahmad833@gmail.com,

idamasayuputri@gmail.com

Abstract

English has become one of the most important languages in the world. This makes English a competency that is very necessary in today's global work or educational institutions. However, many of us have limited access to learning and developing our English language skills. Therefore, this paper aims to find out the perceptions of students at one of the Islamic universities in East Java, which requires students to stay at a university boarding school that has an International Day program as a medium for developing students' English skills which it is also aimed to be the requirements for the students graduation from the university boarding school. To achieve the objectives of this research, interview analysis was used to describe their perceptions regarding the implementation of the program. This research also used a qualitative approach with direct interviews with 5 students from different educational backgrounds. The results of this research figured out that some students only regarded the International Day program as a form of formality for the university boarding school graduation. However, some use this program as a *murajaah* for their previous English language skills and as a medium for developing English language skills. Apart from that, this research also highlights the existence of a gap between students' expectations and reality regarding the implementation of the International Day program, and it was found that there is a quite big gap regarding this. So, it is necessary to evaluate the implementation of the program in terms of intensity, rules, and supervision, as well as additional support for each student, so that students can be more active in carrying out the program. Overall, this research provides insight into the students' perceptions of English language skills development programs and emphasizes the importance of aligning program implementation with the students' expectations for better future outcomes.

Keywords: English skills, International Day program, university boarding school, formality, *murajaah*, learning medium, expectation and reality

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INTRODUCTION

English has become one of the most important languages in the world. This makes English a competency that is very necessary in today's global work or educational institutions (Izzan et al., 2014). However, many Indonesians still have limited access or do not have sufficient opportunities to develop English language skills, such as in Islamic boarding schools. So, programs such as International Day, which aims to help students to learn English, allow many students including Islamic boarding school students to learn English and to improve their English skills with a conversation or anything that can help them. However, not all Islamic boarding schools have succeeded in implementing this medium, such as one of the university boarding schools in East Java. Several groups of students disagree with this kind of program and cannot even develop their skills using this medium itself. Some students from public schools or religion-based school alumni find it difficult to carry out daily conversations and many of them are less enthusiastic about in participating programs like International Day.

The International Day program, in this paper, is one of the programs that is running under the authority of the university at one of the Islamic Universities in East Java. The program is held every Thursday from 5 a.m. to 5 p.m. and requires students, completely, to speak English or Arabic in daily conversation. Students are also asked to have a conversation with their friends or explain something in English or Arabic according to the topic given on that day, then they have to send it via voice notes to WhatsApp. This activity is one of the assessments that will

be a requirement for the students' graduations. They will get their scores depending on how many voice notes they send. The score was counted as one voice note worth 30, two voice notes worth 65, and three or more voice notes worth 95. However, if the students do not send any voice notes, they will get penalties such as blank marks or a fine of IDR 2.000. At the end of their period of leaving boarding school, the most active students during the International Day program will get a reward for their achievements.

In the previous study, Sinaga (2018) said that students who are highly motivated towards English Day will get an improvement in their skills and spirit of learning allowing them to get better English skills from the program. We differentiate between students who are motivated or invested in a program like this. People who are motivated by something because they want to be better at the thing they are motivated by, while people who invest in something, for example, in English in this case, will try harder at something and hope that all the effort given will provide equal returns to them. Meanwhile, in English language support programs such as English Day and International Day, the students' goal is more about learning motivation than investment. In several studies, there are some perceptions that students had when participating in programs such as English Day and International Day.

The previous research on English Week Program by Ferian, et al. (2020) shows an outcome that 70% of the respondents agree and 30% disagree on the program. One of the questions listed is about whether the students are using English throughout the day, and half of them are disagreeing with it. Overall, even though some students do not have a good perception of the implementation of the English Week program, most of them agree that they feel they can improve their English skills through the program. Rohim (2020) also explained that most of the problems also occur in the learning system and the teaching method of the English teacher, which is less effective so it affects the motivation of students to improve their language skills. However, there is also a positive language attitude that convinces them that English plays an important role in the era of globalization. They believe that they will have a lot of knowledge when learning English, and they are happy to learn more English in the future (Utami et al., 2020).

In another previous study, Agustina et al. (2022) in their research, show the opinions of English Language students regarding English day activities which can improve their speaking skills in English and also make them understand the meaning of time discipline and build good cohesion and teamwork. Moreover, the sanctions given make them motivated to carry out these activities. The students also agreed that this activity continued to increase their vocabulary in English. It is also revealed that the student's perception when learning English or when they take part in programs like International Day (see Rohim, 2020; Ferian et al., 2022). However, there are still many students who have not utilized this program properly as a means of improving students' English skills in the field. For example, students who break the rules. This can be influenced by various factors, including student motivation, attitudes, and perceptions (Munir et al., 2023). None of the research has specifically discussed the perceptions of students at the university boarding school in one of the universities in East Java for developing English language skills. Researchers feel the need to explore more deeply the expectations and realities that might be experienced by the students, especially in the FA Dormitory, regarding the International Day activities as a medium for developing English skills, which is an important aspect in the world of work and global education. It is hoped that this research can provide in-depth insight regarding students' perceptions of the International Day program in terms of developing their English language skills.

The focus of this study is to find out the perceptions towards the International Day program of several students at the university, especially the university boarding school, focusing on one dormitory for female students, namely FA, and also to examine whether this program has been running according to the student's expectations. We considered this topic essential to research because programs like this, perhaps, will continue to exist which indicate that Indonesian people from all walks of life (public society, school students, or even students in boarding schools) want to achieve the same goal, one of which is learning English as a foreign language asset for them which also mentioned by Liu (2019) that English must learn actively or passively as a universal communication asset, considering English is an international language that many people acquire (McKay, 2011).

Based on the justification above, this article aims to explore the International Day program in the university boarding school in one of the dormitories, such as: 1) What are the students' perceptions of the International Day program especially in their dormitory? and 2) Does the reality of the International Day program match with the student's expectations?

RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a qualitative model where it does a thorough description of the presentation and analysis of data and does not consider numbers or statistics as the starting point of the analysis. The focus of this research is on one of the Islamic Universities in East Java, Indonesia, which requires its students to take part in university boarding school programs in the first year of college. One of the programs in this university boarding school is the International Day program. The data was collected through group interviews in a directed manner towards 5 female students with different school/boarding school alumni backgrounds. The data obtained was then analyzed using the Analysis Interactive Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) models involving three main steps. Data Condensation is the process of collecting data in the form of respondent interviews and then analyzing the data that has been collected to be more concise and under the needs by focusing on the respondent's perception of the research object. Data Display, at this stage the data that has been analyzed is then presented in the form of a narrative according to the focus of the research. The last step is Conclusion Drawing and Verification according to the object of this research.

Informants Profile

The researchers interviewed 5 students with different school backgrounds/Islamic boarding schools. They were selected based on an easy-to-reach sample where they also participated in language development programs (International Day) making it easier for us to ask them to help become respondents in this research. Before we conducted the interview, we briefly explained the purpose of this study and also asked them if they were willing to use real names or pseudonyms. Interviews are conducted in Indonesian to make it easier for us to communicate with respondents so that there will be no misunderstanding during the interview rather than using a foreign language. They allow the use of pseudonyms on their names and we will also disguise the name of the location we use. Those who participated in our research were Lili, Fafa, Yaya, Rara, and Lala.

The background of each respondent will be; Lili is an alumna of a religion-based school and a Salafi Islamic boarding school so she does not focus on language development but only follows the usual language materials in learning activities at school. But Fafa, is also an alumna of a religion-based school that focuses on memorizing the Quran and also in its dormitory that requires using foreign languages, one of which is English. Then, Yaya is an alumna of a bilingual Islamic boarding school where she is required to use a foreign language in her daily conversation and has a lot of activities for learning and developing her foreign language skills. Rara is an alumna of the MA school and she was active in participating in language activities so she had a basic understanding in foreign languages, especially English. The last is Lala, an alumna of public schools/high schools and Islamic boarding schools that do not focus on language development. Since she was not so interested in these activities, she did not participate in the language activities well.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Before we go into the main discussion, we will first provide some definitions about perception which will be the main focus in this research. A perception, according to what Robbins and Judge (2013) define, is a process of interpretation and organization of sensory impressions to give meaning which happens in human beings. Another definition of perception is “a basis for comprehending the individual differences as for how the individual perceives something will influence how he/she behaves” as stated by Bin-Tahir et al. (2017). In other words, perception is something humans see, touch, or experience that gives meaning or interpretation to their minds. Then, moving to the background of each respondent where we consider that this is very important to know because students' backgrounds can influence the way they interact in participating in this International Day program. Sihite (2021) explains that a teacher's guidance can influence the process of student teaching and learning activities, which an activity that is carried out continuously to improve student knowledge, achievement, and experience. Students who have previous experience with English are perhaps more active in taking part in the International Day program and are able to apply what they have learned previously to the program they are taking now. In contrast to students who do not have a language learning background, perhaps they are more passive in participating in this program. By knowing their previous language exposures, we can better understand the perception given by them regarding the International Day program. The previous language exposures of the respondents are:

..... There have never been any activities or programs to support English skills in my school where my school focused more on religious knowledge, so I don't have any experience on programs like this. (Lili)

..... Even though my boarding school was based on religion and even focused on memorizing Al-Quran (tahfidz), when I was in junior high school I joined the English club for one year. Even in high school, I majored in languages that included English, Arabic, and German. I also had time to participate in English activities in my village while waiting for college to start, so I was quite familiar with activities about English. (Fafa)

..... Previously, I stayed at a bilingual Islamic boarding school so I was used to daily activities that use English and Arabic except on Fridays which use Javanese for daily conversations. There, I didn't participate in other language development activities because I was tired of language-related things. (Yaya)

..... When I was in the MA (Madrasah Aliyah), I joined the English club and also joined the debate club, so I often took part in English debate competitions. I like to learn a foreign language, especially English because my parents got me used to learning English. (Rara)

..... Actually, my high school provided dormitories which are divided into two. There were public dormitories and language dormitories, and at school there were also English Club activities. But I was not interested in the language at all so I preferred to stay in public dormitories and I didn't join the English club. (Lala)

Using the background mentioned above, it can be concluded that most of the respondents who are boarding school graduates have different focuses such as religious focus, memorizing the Quran, and bilingual programs. While the other two respondents are alumnae of senior high schools with different systems. Masrurroh (2019) mentions that SMA (*Sekolah Menengah Atas*), a public senior high school, is under the Ministry of Education, and MA (*Madrasah Aliyah*), the Islamic based-senior high school, is under the Ministry of Religion. There are mostly no differences between both two systems in which the Ministry of Religion adds more religious subjects to their school. With these, we hope to be able to understand the perception that will be given by the respondents regarding International Day.

From the statements related to the background of each respondent, some respondents are familiar with activities such as International Day, but some are still unfamiliar with these activities and were new to this activity when they were students and lived in a university boarding school. Knowing the background of each respondent, we connect the background with research questions related to respondents' perception of International Day activities in the university boarding school. We grouped the answers from each respondent's perception into three different groups, which are International Day as a form of formality, International Day as a *murojaah*, and International Day as an English development program.

Students' Perception toward International Day Program

International Day as a Form of Formality

Wahyuni (2014) said that many students who take part in activities such as International Day rarely speak English and only speak English when the teacher is present for the teacher's evaluation of the students. We found the perception of two respondents that led to the thought that they underwent the International Day program only as a form of formality to complete their responsibilities as students living in the university boarding school. Citing their responses:

..... I don't like how this program runs. I mean, this program has a good goal but my friend and I don't follow this program well. We don't often use English or Arabic, because we only do it as a form of formality as when doing the tasks given. (Lili)

..... I don't really like this program because it's very ineffective. I am not interested in foreign languages but at least if the program is well supervised, I will still carry it out. Even though on this international day I still do the assignments, I don't think this activity is very important. (Lala)

Of the two statements above related to the program, it is said that even though the purpose of this program is good, the implementation is less effective and is only considered as a form of formality by the students. Both statements highlighted that there is a lack of interest and active involvement in this activity. Lala feels that without good supervision, the program does not have a significant impact. As a result, the International Day program is not considered important and is only carried out simply to fulfill tasks. This shows the need for evaluation and improvement in the implementation of the program to be more effective and relevant.

The answer given by Lili mentioned that she only participated in the International Day program as a form of formality. The word “formality” taken from the Indonesian word “*formalitas*” in that context is something that is being done to accomplish a task. If we see the word in KBBI which is the official Indonesian dictionary, the word shows a meaning of “just following the rules or procedures.” Then we could conclude that she participated in this program just to accomplish or complete her obligation as a student in the university boarding school in following whatever the rules given which is, in this case, the International Day program. The other respondent, Lala, did not mention if she did it as a formality but she stated that even if she did all the tasks, she didn’t think it was important to follow it thoroughly. These two answers given by both respondents seem they are not into language (as stated in the background of the respondents) and the program itself is not interesting to them.

International Day as a ‘Murajaah’

Previously, International Day was merely considered as a formality, while another perception given by one of the respondents was that she considered International Day as an intermediary or activity for her to be able to do *murajaah*. *Murajaah* is a method of repeating material that has been studied or mastered. Another definition of *murajaah* is as stated by Nurbaiti et al. (2021) that it is an act of repetition to do in maintaining memorization. This word is taken from the Arabic term which is often used by Indonesians in contexts such as repeating the memorization of the Al-Quran or religious books. The response from one of the respondents regarding this International Day means that it is considered not to be intrusive for her.

..... In my own opinion or perception, I feel that this International Day program is indeed good, but compared to the bilingual program implemented in my ex boarding school, this program is far behind because of lack of intensity. So, I myself consider this program only as a *murajaah* activity. (Yaya)

The respondent's statement above shows a different perspective or point of view regarding the use of the International Day program. Several other respondents took advantage of this program to improve their English skills, but from the respondent's statement it can be said that International Day still has shortcomings in terms of intensity when compared to other programs and has not been able to meet students’ expectations. Therefore, utilizing international day activities as an intermediary of *murajaah* is one of the positive ways that can be implemented by the students, in other words she can still look for various positive sides of the International Day program and will not feel burdened with this. There are several ways that International Day program organizers can maximize the output obtained by students, including providing more structured activities and increasing the intensity of program implementation so that it remains in line with the program’s objectives.

International Day as an English Skill Development Program

Returning to the goal of the International Day program is to help people, especially students, to develop their knowledge and English skills. This has been explained in the purpose of the International Day program in the work program designed by the university and one of the researchers is also the party who is running this program in the university boarding school so that it can be included in the purpose of this research. With a program like this, students should get some benefits from it as in conversations that include speaking skills and also the other skills. There are 2 respondents who responded to the International Day program with good responses, such as:

..... Since I was in school, I have always been interested in language, so I like this program where it can help me to practice my English skills. (Fafa)

..... My parents have taught me English since I was little. Even though I'm not very proficient, I'm used to having to take part in English-based activities. Therefore, I like this program to help me continue learning English again. (Rara)

From the two respondents, it can be seen that they have a better background with English or other foreign languages. Both respondents said they were familiar with English activities. One is used to the English language because their parents have taught her English since childhood and the other is also used to it because of encouragement from the previous school that had a foreign language program. Both respondents like English activities and want to improve their skills, because they like and are familiar with English activities. One of the respondents stated that she likes and wants to improve her language skills in this International Day activity, so that her interest in participating in International Day activities is quite good.

One of the respondents, Rara, mentioned that her parents have been teaching her English since she was a child. Then, we also found the same case where parents are helping their children to learn English. In the previous study, Wahyuningsih and Mua'dib (2023) who did a research study about parents' role in enhancing children's English skills, focusing only on the mothers, found out that the parents (the mothers) have been doing many ways to help their children to learn English such as facilitating some accesses to both English learning resources and courses, some mothers also tried to talk in English to encourage their children to also talk in English. The involvement of parents' role in children's education has a meaningful impact on their success (Robles-Goodwin et al., 2023).

While the background of this respondent, Rara, of her parents' involvement in teaching English is that her father is indeed an English teacher. She used to often hear her father talking in English and her mother also encouraged her to master English like her father. Since then, Rara wants to learn English more so she could inherit her father's knowledge. Moreover, in the process of learning English, she was also taught by her father and was helped by her mother in memorizing vocabularies. Therefore, family, especially parents have a very important role in the children's education because it is the first environment recognized by the children. So, parents have the responsibility of their children's basic knowledge (Haditama et al., 2018).

Expectation VS Reality towards International Day Program

Expectation and reality are two words that are often connected. The International Day program, as mentioned above, aims to facilitate students as a program to help them improve their English skill. Since this program is being held in the university boarding school, there must be an indicator of this program aimed to be. However, expectation and reality are the main concern while running a program to examine whether the reality accomplishes the expectation hoped for or doesn't even match at all. The less the gap between expectation and reality, the more it gets closer to the goal, meaning that if there is a big gap between both defines that the subject still needs improvement. This case also occurs in the International Day program which we are also looking for the reality that happened is whether in line with the expectation or even much different. We will examine the expectation and the reality regarding the International Day program from the respondents.

..... My expectation is that this program will run as it should from 5 a.m. to 5 p.m. But in reality, not all students do it properly. (Lili)

..... Well, I thought this International Day program would be stricter and better than in my old school, seeing this is college level and I previously felt a little scared because I think everyone is expert in speaking English, but the fact is not so. Many of my friends ignore this program and prefer to speak Indonesian. Moreover, I rarely see other students who are sanctioned for not speaking English or Arabic. (Fafa)

..... I thought that when the international day program went well, we would have a conversation in English all day with my friends like in my Islamic boarding school before. But it turns out that the program is not even a day and we really don't interact with English. I can say that the implementation of my speaking in the international day program is only 10-20% in a day. (Yaya)

..... My first expectation regarding the International Day program is that everyone who lives in the dormitory will actually communicate in English and Arabic and apply it in daily activities. However, in fact, many students do not obey the rules well and continue to communicate using Indonesian, so that International Day is only realized through the tasks given to us in the form of voice notes about the topic chosen. (Rara)

..... My expectation towards International Day is that this program will run very seriously and strictly, but in fact not as serious and strictly as that. (Lala)

Based on the results of the responses from 5 respondents regarding the expectations and reality of implementing the International Day program, it can be concluded that there is a significant discrepancy between the expectations and reality experienced by students. They hope that the International Day program can become a medium for developing English language skills that runs intensively, is closely monitored, and can help increase their knowledge. However, in reality, the implementation of this program did not match respondents' expectations. The international Day program is not intensive, the application of rules and sanctions is also not as strict as imagined. Apart from that, the tasks given are mostly in the form of voice messages rather than direct interactions in foreign language, which cannot be used as a medium for developing their speaking skills due to the lack of direct communication. Batubara et al. (2023) in one of their studies also explained that the implementation of the English Day program had not been carried out well because some students still used Indonesian and some students did not have confidence to speak English with friends around them.

To meet the expectations of respondents and other students regarding the International Day program, the organizers need to increase the intensity of implementing this program which can be done by increasing the duration of program implementation and ensuring that this duration is carried out in a structured manner. The application of rules and sanctions also needs to be tightened to maintain student discipline during the program. This can be done by implementing an attendance list and clarifying sanctions in writing. Apart from that, there needs to be additional guidance for students who experience difficulties so that all students get maximum benefits from this program. By applying the methods above, it is hoped that students can fulfill their expectations in maximizing the International Day program as a medium for developing their English language skills.

CONCLUSION

We found out that the International Day program at one of the Islamic Universities in East Java has various perceptions among its students. Five respondents representing different educational backgrounds showed diverse views of this program. Some respondents considered International Day only as a formality to fulfill the requirements for graduation from the campus Islamic boarding school, where they took part in this program without much enthusiasm. However, there are also those who think that International Day is an opportunity to do *murajaah*, repeating material that has been studied. On the other hand, other respondents appreciated this program as a means of developing important English language skills. They like this program because they are used to using English from an early age, either from the educational environment or previous English language development programs.

We have also examined the students' expectations for the International Day program are quite high, in which they expect there will be English and Arabic interactions throughout the day with strict implementation of the rules. However, the reality shows that there is a gap between expectations and reality, with many students inconsistent in their use of foreign language. Overall, this program shows the need for evaluation and improvement to improve the system in achieving the expected goals. Stricter supervision and greater encouragement to actively participate in foreign languages may increase the various benefits of this International Day program for students. Researchers feel the need for further research related to the International Day program due to the limitations of the research object which was only carried out in one dormitory at a university boarding school in East Java and only focused on 5 female respondents. Researchers hope that this research can provide benefits and in-depth information regarding student perceptions of the International Day program in its implementation system which can make this program better in the future.

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