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## THE ROLE OF STUDENT ASSISTANTS IN PROMOTING INTERACTIVE ENGLISH LEARNING

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### ABSTRACTS

This study explores the role of student assistants in enhancing interactive English learning at MA Bahrul Ulum, an Islamic senior high school operating within a pesantren-based educational system. Positioned as part of a collaborative teaching strategy, student assistants serve not only as academic support but also as facilitators who promote learner engagement through a variety of interactive approaches. Employing a qualitative descriptive methodology, data were collected through classroom observations, interviews with English teachers and teaching assistants, as well as student reflections. The findings indicate that student assistants contribute meaningfully to building a more dynamic and student-centered classroom. They incorporate strategies such as language games, group discussions, role-plays, and the use of digital tools to make lessons more engaging. These methods were found to lower students' anxiety when speaking English and increase overall classroom participation. Despite challenges such as limited experience and time management difficulties, assistants were able to bridge the gap between formal instruction and informal, communicative language practice. Their presence also made learning more relatable, especially through peer-to-peer interaction. Furthermore, their efforts aligned with the goals of the Merdeka Curriculum, which encourages contextualized, independent, and meaningful learning. In the pesantren setting, student assistants successfully integrated Islamic values into language activities, making English instruction more culturally relevant. The study concludes that, with proper training and structured implementation, student assistantship programs have the potential to significantly improve English language education in Islamic-based schools by enhancing motivation, fostering communication, and creating supportive learning environments.

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### ARTICLE INFO

**Article History:**

*Received: 20 May 2025*

*Revised: 1 June 2025*

*Published: 10 June 2025*

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**Keywords:**

Student assistant,  
Interactive learning,  
English education,  
Pesantren based school,  
Merdeka Curriculum

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### INTRODUCTION

In contemporary education, there is a growing emphasis on the development of communicative competence in English, particularly in secondary schools where language proficiency is essential for both academic and social success (Heggernes 2021). Interactive learning, which encourages students to utilize the target language in authentic situations, is one of the key tactics in accomplishing this goal (Eli 2021). English is frequently taught using more conventional methods in pesantren-based schools like MA Bahrul Ulum, which may reduce the opportunity for unplanned engagement (Andriani 2024).

Student assistant participation has become a creative way to address this issue and

encourage more dynamic and student-centered learning environments (Barrasso and Spilios 2021). Whether senior students or pre-service teachers, student assistants can serve as a link between formal education and peer engagement, providing assistance with academic material and classroom management (Ferrari 2023). In situations when teacher-centered approaches or big class numbers predominate, their position becomes even more crucial.

The term "interactive English learning" describes teaching strategies that encourage student cooperation, communication, and active engagement (Gunawan, Atiqoh, and Suharti 2023). To improve speaking abilities and lessen students' anxiety of making mistakes, strategies like role plays, language games, group talks, and pair work are frequently employed (Umniyah, Setiawan, and Nugroho 2025). Because peer-led activities frequently promote increased comfort and readiness to speak up, these tactics can be more relatable and accessible to students when directed by student assistants (McHale et al. 2022).

The ideals of the Merdeka Curriculum, which promote flexibility, independence, and contextual learning, are well-aligned with student assistantship (Jasiah et al. 2024). The curriculum encourages teamwork and the growth of 21st-century abilities, such as communication, which can be successfully fostered by interactive learning spaces and peer interaction (Martinez 2022). However, putting such innovations into practice in pesantren-based contexts necessitates consideration for regional values and instructional customs.

The various functions that student assistants perform in encouraging interactive English learning at MA Bahrul Ulum are examined in this study (Zhai and Wibowo 2023). This study intends to demonstrate how assistantship models might help teachers and students enhance the quality of English language instruction, especially in religious school contexts, by looking at various approaches, difficulties, and contributions (Altun and Khurshid Ahmad 2021).

## **METHOD**

For the purpose to investigate how student assistants might improve interactive English instruction at MA Bahrul Ulum, a qualitative descriptive method was used (Stanley 2023). To obtain a thorough grasp of classroom dynamics and the real-life experiences of both student helpers and students, a qualitative approach was selected (Kumar and Praveenakumar 2025). The researcher was able to provide a thorough description of actual teaching methods without changing any variables because to the descriptive approach.

Semi-structured interviews, documentation, and observations were used to gather data. Observations in the classroom concentrated on the ways in which student assistants supported interactive learning exercises such role plays, group discussions, and pair work (Jones et al. 2022). English teachers, student assistants, and a few chosen students were interviewed to learn more about their opinions of the assistantship program and how it affects student participation in the classroom. Lesson plans and student activity records were also examined as supporting documentation for the results.

Thematic analysis was the data analysis method employed, in which new themes and patterns were found in field data and interpreted in light of the study's goals (Lochmiller 2021). Triangulation across many sources, such as observations, interviews, and documentation, guaranteed the reliability of the results. Throughout the whole research procedure, ethical considerations, such as participant consent and anonymity, were closely adhered to.

## **FINDINGS AND RESULT**

The findings of this study suggest that the involvement of student assistants in MA Bahrul Ulum's English instruction greatly enhances the development of an engaging and student-centered learning environment. Observations in the classroom revealed that student assistants actively supported teachers by leading small group discussions, planning language

games, and encouraging speaking exercises. These efforts promoted greater student participation and reduced classroom passivity.

According to two English teachers at MA Bahrul Ulum, student assistants played a vital role in creating informal bonds between teachers and students. This helped reduce student anxiety in speaking English. As stated by one teacher, *"Students feel more at ease and open to speaking when the assistants participate with group activities. They don't feel as judged as they would in a classroom"*. This supports Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis which asserts that lowering anxiety enhances language acquisition. Peer involvement, in this context, functioned as an emotional buffer, minimizing the perceived authority gap and cultivating a more supportive environment (Zhang 2023). From interviews with student assistants, it was evident that they viewed themselves not only as academic supporters but also as motivators and role models. One assistant shared, *"I try to make them feel that English is fun, not scary. When I joke with them or show them how to pronounce something, they laugh, and they try again"*. This attitude reflects the Sociocultural Theory of Vygotsky, which emphasizes the role of social interaction in cognitive development. Through guided support often referred to as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) assistants helped scaffold learners' linguistic skills, enabling students to perform tasks they might not accomplish alone (Tzuriel and Tzuriel 2021). Such peer encouragement was seen as a key factor in building students' speaking confidence.

Students' perspectives, gathered through informal interviews and written reflections, also confirmed these findings. One student wrote, *"Kak Intan reassured me that it's okay to make mistakes, which helped me overcome my fear of speaking English. That encouraged me to try"*. This demonstrates how a low-anxiety, emotionally safe learning environment fosters willingness to take risks in communication an essential condition for effective language acquisition according to Krashen's Input and Affective Filter Hypotheses. When learners feel supported, they are more likely to engage actively with the input they receive, internalize language structures, and develop fluency (Luo 2024). This reflects the importance of psychological safety in the learning environment, where errors are seen as opportunities to learn rather than failures.

From documentation analysis, including lesson plans and group activity reports, it was found that learning activities with student assistants were more interactive and student-oriented. Assistants were involved in designing and modifying role-plays, vocabulary games, and conversation practices. This collaborative planning with teachers showed a dynamic partnership in instructional design. This approach reflects principles of task-based language teaching (TBLT) and promotes meaningful language use (Baralt 2023). Collaboration between teachers and assistants in planning and executing these activities supports constructivist learning theory, which views learning as a socially mediated and shared process (Efgivia et al. 2021).

Despite these benefits, several challenges were reported. Some assistants noted difficulties in managing noisy groups or giving instructions clearly due to limited experience. One assistant admitted, *"Sometimes I'm not sure how to make the group focus, especially if they're too playful"*. These challenges, however, are consistent with experiential learning theory, which suggests that novice educators improve through direct experience, reflection, and gradual adaptation. Teachers noted that most assistants showed improvement over time, especially when given regular feedback and opportunities to observe best practices (Devi and Thendral 2023). However, these challenges were viewed as learning moments by both teachers and assistants, with gradual improvement over time.

Another significant factor was the use of educational media. Student assistants frequently used mobile apps, digital flashcards, and visual aids to teach vocabulary and

support conversation practice. Students appeared more engaged with these tools than with traditional worksheets. This shift from textbook-centered instruction to multi-modal learning diversified students' exposure to the language. This aligns with multimodal learning theory, which emphasizes that combining visual, auditory, and interactive input enhances comprehension and retention especially for second language learners (Giannakos and Cukurova 2023).

Importantly, the pesantren-based culture of MA Bahrul Ulum did not hinder interactive learning. Instead, student assistants integrated Islamic values into practice, using English in dorm conversations about prayer times, adab (etiquette), and daily routines. One teacher noted, *"This helps students relate English to their real lives and religious practices"*. This supports contextual learning theory, which posits that learning is most effective when connected to real-world contexts. Embedding English use in familiar religious and social routines made the language more meaningful and applicable for students (Chuang 2021). This contextualized language learning was appreciated by both students and teachers.

In addition to providing instructional support, student helpers contributed significantly to sustaining the pace of classroom activities and reinforcing discipline. Despite lacking formal training in classroom management, many assistants developed their own techniques to maintain student focus during learning tasks. One effective strategy frequently observed was the assignment of group leaders within discussion circles to help moderate dialogue and report progress. This technique was noted in lesson observations and mentioned in assistant reflections. *"By letting one student take charge, the others tend to follow more seriously,"* one assistant explained during an interview, This method not only helped manage behavior but also promoted autonomy and peer regulation (Uslu and Durak 2022), reflecting social learning theory (Wals 2023), where learners model behavior from peers and develop responsibility through guided participation. Teachers acknowledged this method as a productive way to promote autonomy and responsibility among students, particularly during collaborative activities.

Another key finding was the role of student assistants in language modelling, a practice aligned with Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which emphasizes learning through observation and imitation (Koutroubas and Galanakis 2022). During classroom observations, assistants were consistently seen demonstrating pronunciation, repeating teacher instructions in simpler terms, and providing short language examples. These actions served as scaffolded input, making it easier for learners to internalize linguistic forms. Students appeared to respond more positively and with greater ease to these assistant-led demonstrations compared to those from teachers alone. Compared to teacher-only presentations, students responded more comfortably to the assistants' guidance. *"I think when I show them how to say it casually, they feel like it's okay to try,"* said one assistant in an interview. This suggests that students perceive assistants as more approachable, allowing them to absorb language in a more relaxed and natural way. Observation logs recorded increased student mimicry and spontaneous repetition following assistant-led examples.

Student participation noticeably increased when assistants were present. Observation records indicated that more students volunteered to answer questions or take part in speaking tasks during assistant-facilitated sessions. In one documented case, a typically shy student confidently joined a role-play activity after gentle encouragement from an assistant. *"Kak Ita whispered to me, 'It's okay to try; I'll help you,' and I felt brave enough to do it,"* the student shared in a reflection journal. These brief but impactful moments illustrate the assistants' motivational influence and their ability to create a psychologically safe space for learning.

Assistants also played an important role in delivering differentiated instruction, particularly in classrooms with mixed-ability learners. In such groups, assistants adjusted

explanations, translated difficult vocabulary into Bahasa Indonesia, and offered direct support to students who struggled—without making them feel singled out. According to one teacher, “*They really help in breaking down concepts and giving attention I sometimes can’t manage in a large class*”. Documentation from lesson plans showed that assistants were tasked with guiding specific students or groups based on language proficiency levels. This approach ensured more equitable participation and supported students across varying levels of ability.

Perhaps most notably, the assistantship program’s success was underpinned by the collaborative relationship between teachers and assistants. Rather than being treated as mere helpers, assistants were fully involved in the planning, execution, and post-lesson reflection stages. Weekly coordination meetings allowed teachers and assistants to assess student progress, revise instructional approaches, and prepare for upcoming sessions. “*We sit down together every Thursday to talk about what worked and what needs to change,*” one teacher noted during the interview, This professional mentoring aligns with co-teaching and reflective practice models, which emphasize shared responsibility and continuous improvement in instructional effectiveness (Karathanos-Aguilar and Ervin-Kassab 2022). Documentation from weekly briefing logs reflected this ongoing communication and adjustment process, which contributed to continual improvement in instructional delivery. Over time, this structured collaboration fostered a culture of growth, mentorship, and shared ownership in the learning process.

## CONCLUSION

Conclusions of this study unequivocally show that student assistants at MA Bahrul Ulum have a significant and impactful role in fostering interactive English learning. In addition to helping teachers present the content more successfully, their presence in the classroom fosters a more laid-back, student-centered learning atmosphere where students are inspired to actively participate, especially in speaking exercises.

Student assistants are peer motivators that help students become more confident and less nervous when speaking by leading interactive exercises, role-plays, and group discussions. They are approachable because of their same age and status to the kids, which makes it easier for them to communicate in English.

The Merdeka Curriculum’s emphasis on student autonomy, contextual understanding, and meaningful learning experiences is in line with the application of interactive learning methodologies, which are further improved by the participation of student assistants. Notwithstanding little obstacles such a lack of classroom management skills or teaching experience, student assistants’ efforts greatly enhanced the teaching and learning process as a whole.

Their capacity to incorporate cultural and religious values into English training within the framework of pesantren-based education further demonstrates the adaptability and applicability of interactive teaching methods in Islamic educational environments. Consequently, it is advised that structured assistantship programs be created and encouraged since they provide significant educational advantages to both students and schools.

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