

Formulaic or Felt? Investigating the Use of “*How’s your day?*” in an International Primary Classroom

Sitti Maryam

Universitas Mataram

sittimaryam@staff.unram.ac.id*

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the pragmatic and cultural function of the phrase “*How’s your day?*” in an international primary school classroom in Makassar, Indonesia. Drawing from reflective observation and daily interaction with Grade 4 to 6 students, the research explores how this simple conversational question facilitates students’ confidence, expressiveness, and natural use of English. The study adopts a reflective descriptive design, built on long-term classroom experiences, observation and interaction with students - where English served as the primary language of communication. The data were generated through memory-based reconstruction, reflective journals, and non-recorded classroom observations. The analysis followed a thematic reflection approach. Findings reveal that “*How’s your day?*” operates as more than a casual greeting. It acts as a social bridge fostering authentic communication, empathy, and a sense of belonging among young learners. Students initially responded formulaically but gradually developed ownership of the phrase, using it spontaneously with peers, teachers, and even family members. The exchange nurtured natural speech habits and pragmatic awareness, showing that emotional engagement and context-rich interactions enhance language learning more effectively than rigid grammar-based instruction. Pedagogically, the study highlights the importance of integrating authentic conversational routines into English language teaching, especially in multilingual environments. Such interactions humanize communication, promote cultural understanding, and support affective dimensions of language learning. The study concludes that teaching English expressiveness is not only about fluency but also about connection, confidence, and care values embedded in meaningful conversation.

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INTRODUCTION

Conversational phrases like “*How’s your day?*” deserve a greater place in the English classrooms of non-English-speaking countries. Such expressions are not merely linguistic elements but cultural bridges, representing the mannerisms, warmth, and social etiquette that shape everyday communication among English speakers. For English learners, especially those in contexts where English functions as a foreign language, understanding and using these phrases is a step toward grasping the pragmatic and sociocultural dimensions of the language. Language and culture are closely linked in communication because every word or expression we choose carries

sociocultural meaning. Meyerhoff (2018) explains that “alternations between different language varieties index personal style, social power and national identity,” showing that even small language choices reflect who we are and how we relate to others. This means communication is always connected to cultural norms, identities, and social relationships.

This phrase personally resonates with me. During my years studying in Australia, I was often greeted by my landlord with a cheerful, “*Welcome back. How’s your day?*” At first, it felt awkward and clumsy; I hesitated, unsure whether my English would sound natural enough. Yet, as the days passed, I learned that such questions were not tests of linguistic accuracy but invitations to connect. My landlord was a warm woman who loved to talk about her favorite shows and movies, and our daily exchanges gradually helped me overcome my nervousness. I learned to meet people’s eyes while speaking and to let go of the fear of being judged. In contrast, I realized how rare such intimate, casual conversations were in my own culture. Growing up, my mother would greet me not with open-ended curiosity but with questions about my school performance, “Did you get the highest score today?” which reflected a different set of cultural expectations about communication.

This personal encounter became a foundation for my teaching philosophy. When I returned to Indonesia and began teaching in an international primary school in Makassar, I carried that phrase “*How’s your day?*” into my classroom. It became more than a greeting; it was a pedagogical tool, a bridge between linguistic learning and cultural understanding. In English-speaking countries, small talk serves as social glue. It establishes rapport, signals friendliness, and sustains conversation (McCarthy, 1992). Introducing this element to young learners in Indonesia, I found that it encouraged them to express themselves more openly and naturally. Rather than viewing English as a rigid academic subject, they began to experience it as a living, breathing language of human connection.

This study focuses on primary school students in Makassar, a metropolitan city in Eastern Indonesia where English is becoming increasingly prominent through international education. The research was conducted at Lentera Kasih Primary School, which uses a hybrid model that combines the Cambridge International Curriculum with elements of Singaporean assessment frameworks. During my five years teaching English, Novel Study, Library, and Social Studies there, I observed that the school’s English-only policy created an immersive environment that reshaped students’ daily interactions. Many students carried English expressions beyond the classroom, using them at home and in social settings, showing that language learning can influence behavior and identity outside school. Duff (2011) also notes that language learning is a social process in which learners adopt new ways of speaking and participating, gradually forming new identities through everyday interactions.

The phrase “*How’s your day?*” was particularly effective after school hours when students were more relaxed and eager to share. I had taught all grade levels, from Grade 1 to 6, and became familiar with every student in the cohort of 2023, totaling around eighty children, of which 26 of them attended Grade 4 to Grade 6. Over time, I noticed that students began to anticipate this question, viewing it as an opportunity to speak freely. Their responses ranged from recounting lessons and sharing family news to expressing personal feelings or frustrations about long school hours. These conversations revealed sides of their personalities not easily visible in structured classroom settings. In essence, the phrase transformed into a ritual of connection and self-expression, making English feel like their language rather than a subject imposed from outside.

The research grew from my own linguistic journey as a non-native English speaker. Like many learners, I once believed that proficiency meant grammatical perfection. My perfectionism caused anxiety, silencing me even when I possessed a rich vocabulary. However, real-life communication in Australia taught me otherwise. Language is not a mathematical code but an art form - a medium of expression, empathy, and identity. As Norton (2016) argues, language is a social practice that helps shape who we are and how we relate to the world; through it, people negotiate identities and gain access to different social, symbolic, and cultural spaces. When I

introduced “*How’s your day?*” to my Indonesian students, I hoped they would also experience English as a living art rather than a mechanical skill. Over time, I observed that such small conversational routines helped them overcome fear and embarrassment, fostering confidence and naturalness in speaking.

The significance of this study lies in how formulaic expressions -those routine, prefabricated chunks of language such as greetings or social questions- function as gateways to fluency and cultural literacy. Wray (2012) defines formulaic language as multi-word units that are stored and retrieved as wholes, often used for social rather than informational purposes. For children in bilingual or multilingual environments, these expressions help bridge the gap between language systems, facilitating smoother interaction (Pawley & Syder, 2014). In the context of an international primary classroom in Indonesia, a phrase like “*How’s your day?*” carries not only linguistic meaning but also emotional and cultural values. It trains students in pragmatics - the ability to use language appropriately in social contexts (Taguchi, 2011) - while nurturing empathy, politeness, and intercultural sensitivity.

In contrast to earlier research on classroom discourse, which tends to examine teacher talk, code-switching, or translanguaging practices (Mateus, 2014), this research offers a micro-level lens on a single phrase and its sociocultural implications. While many studies have examined how teachers scaffold conversation or how students acquire communicative competence, few have looked at how everyday, formulaic greetings contribute to shaping students’ emotional engagement and confidence in English. This study thus positions itself within sociolinguistics and applied linguistics, emphasizing the intersection of pragmatics, emotion, and identity in second language learning.

Indonesian English education has traditionally emphasized syntax and grammatical mastery. The national curriculum, despite gradual reforms, still leans toward accuracy-focused instruction rather than communicative fluency. In contrast, private or international schools, particularly those adopting foreign curricula, prioritize oral communication and cross-cultural competence. In these contexts, expressions like “*How’s your day?*” become powerful tools for shaping language use that is both contextually and culturally appropriate.

Based on prolonged classroom and informal observations, I found that such expressions foster genuine communication among students. They reduce anxiety, encourage storytelling, and invite empathy across peer groups. Pragmatically, the question “*How’s your day?*” functions as an invitation to share personal experience, uniting students across different personalities and backgrounds. It is an open-ended prompt that signals genuine interest and emotional support. While some students initially responded with simple replies mistaking it for “How are you?” others engaged in longer narratives, discussing topics ranging from group projects to family events. This variation itself is a rich source of data, reflecting how learners interpret and perform English through their own linguistic and cultural lenses.

Theoretically, this study is grounded in sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and speech act theory (Alston & Searle, 1970). From a sociocultural perspective, learning is mediated through interaction, and language serves as a cultural tool that shapes thought and identity. From a pragmatic standpoint, utterances like “*How’s your day?*” perform social functions beyond literal meaning -they establish rapport, maintain solidarity, and express care. The interplay between these theories underpins this research, which seeks to investigate how young learners in an international Indonesian classroom interpret and respond to this routine expression, and what it reveals about their linguistic, emotional, and cultural adaptation.

Although many studies on classroom discourse have examined teacher talk, code-switching, and translanguaging (Mateus, 2014), very little is known about how small, everyday formulaic expressions - especially a single routine greeting - affect young learners’ emotions, identity, and pragmatic skills in international or bilingual primary schools. Most existing research looks at formulaic expressions only as vocabulary or part of communicative competence, but rarely explores their social and emotional roles in daily school interactions.

In Indonesia, this gap is even more visible. Local studies still focus heavily on grammar-based teaching, accuracy, and broad language policies, so there is almost no empirical research on how children in international or hybrid-curriculum schools use and interpret formulaic English expressions in their everyday routines.

In summary, this study explores the use and perception of “*How’s your day?*” among primary school students in an international setting in Makassar. It aims to understand whether such formulaic expressions are used merely as classroom routines or as felt, meaningful acts of communication. The study seeks to answer the question: Do students perceive and use the phrase “*How’s your day?*” as a formulaic routine or as an authentic, emotionally felt interaction? Through this inquiry, the research contributes to the growing field of language socialization and intercultural pragmatics, shedding light on how simple phrases can play profound roles in shaping learners’ communicative confidence and cultural understanding.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1. Formulaic Language in Communication

Language learning does not only involve remembering vocabulary or mastering grammar; it also requires understanding how language is used in real communication. (Wray, 2012) characterizes formulaic expressions as ready-made units—fully or partly set phrases—that speakers retrieve as single items, including examples like “*Thank you*,” “*See you later*,” and “*How’s your day?*”. These expressions help learners sound fluent and natural because they are easily recalled without much grammatical thinking. Pawley and Syder (2014) points out that everyday fluency among native speakers is largely supported by their use of formulaic language.

In English, many of these fixed expressions function as what McCarthy (1992) describes as phatic communication - language meant to build a pleasant social connection rather than convey factual content. For example, when someone says “*How’s your day?*”, the question is often not meant to get a detailed report but to show care, friendliness, or interest in another person’s life. This makes formulaic expressions essential for maintaining smooth social interaction.

In EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts, however, learners may not always recognize this social function. They often interpret such expressions literally, answering with short or textbook-style responses such as “I’m fine” or “It was okay.” Yet, as their confidence grows, they begin to elaborate more, share personal experiences, and understand that communication is not about correctness alone but about connection.

2. Cultural Meaning in Language Use

Language and culture are closely connected. Kramsch (2002) maintains that every instance of speech encodes the cultural beliefs and social conventions of a community. In English-speaking cultures, small talk is a symbol of friendliness and openness. Asking “*How’s your day?*” is one way to maintain positive relationships and show empathy. In contrast, many Asian cultures, including Indonesia, tend to start conversations with practical or factual questions, such as “*Have you eaten?*” or “*Where are you going?*” rather than open emotional ones. Thus, introducing students to common English expressions helps them understand not only vocabulary but also the cultural expectations behind interaction.

Meyerhoff (2018) also explains that sociolinguistic competence refers to the ability to use language suitably in various contexts. It enables speakers to modify their speech according to the social setting. Introducing these expressions to young learners early on helps them develop both language skills and cultural awareness. When teachers demonstrate greetings and casual conversation, students begin to view English as a means of building relationships rather than merely a school subject.

3. Pragmatics and the Social Function of Greetings

Language should be seen as a form of action. When people speak, they are not just producing

words but doing things with them. Kissine (2012) argues that “speaking is a type of social action,” showing that utterances carry real power and purpose beyond mere information exchange. A greeting like “*How’s your day?*” performs a social action by showing interest and respect. This view of language as action belongs to speech act theory, which is central to pragmatics. Taguchi (2011) notes that pragmatic competence requires interpreting meaning through context rather than relying solely on grammar. For children learning English in multilingual environments, building this skill is just as crucial as learning new words.

Routine expressions also help learners engage emotionally with language. When students feel that their teacher or peers are genuinely interested in their day, they are more likely to respond with enthusiasm and confidence. These small exchanges create a classroom environment where English feels real and meaningful. This emotional engagement is often missing in traditional EFL classrooms that focus mainly on grammar drills or textbook dialogues.

4. Sociocultural Theory and Interaction

Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory highlights that learning happens through social interaction and cultural mediation. Language is both a tool for communication and a medium for learning. In classrooms, greetings and short conversations provide a scaffolded space where learners can practice language in meaningful ways. When teachers initiate small talk such as “*How’s your day?*”, they model authentic communication that allows students to respond according to their ability, building confidence gradually.

From this perspective, learning to speak English naturally requires exposure to real-life interaction rather than memorized dialogues. Norton (2016) also stresses that language learning is closely connected to one’s sense of identity. As students start using English to share their experiences or emotions, they develop a more personal stake in the language. This personal investment strengthens their sense of belonging within the school’s English-speaking community.

5. Translanguaging and Language Adaptation

Recent research in multilingual education highlights translanguaging, the dynamic and flexible use of several languages during communication (Nottingham et al., 2020). In international schools where English is the main medium, students often switch between English and their first language depending on context. It is noted that translanguaging allows learners to negotiate meaning and identity across languages. While this practice can support comprehension, expressions like “*How’s your day?*” encourage learners to stay within English and practice interaction in full sentences. These greetings also serve as safe starting points for spontaneous speaking.

In culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms, these set expressions act as common interactional routines that bring students together. Learners with lower proficiency can still join in because the question is widely understood and allows flexible responses. This inclusiveness supports a more equal communicative environment (Gilbert, 2018).

6. Research Gap and Theoretical Base

While many studies have explored pragmatics, formulaic language, and translanguaging, most focus on adult learners or formal instruction at the university (Taguchi, 2011). There is limited research on how young learners in primary schools acquire and internalize everyday expressions that carry emotional and cultural meaning. The phrase “*How’s your day?*” seems ordinary, but it opens a valuable window into how children perceive English as either a memorized classroom routine (formulaic) or a genuine, meaningful question (felt).

The theoretical base for this research combines formulaic language theory (Wray, 2012) speech act and pragmatic theory (Oshima, 2016), and sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978). Together, these frameworks explain how language learning involves both social interaction and emotional connection. By studying how students respond to and use “*How’s your day?*”, this

research seeks to understand how routine language contributes to students' confidence, fluency, and cultural awareness in an international classroom.

METHOD

Research Design

This research applied a reflective descriptive qualitative approach, drawing on the researcher's long-term experience as a classroom teacher. The observations were accumulated organically through daily interactions with students across several subjects - English, Novel Study, Library, and Social Studies - as well as informal conversations after dismissal time. Rather than using formal data-collection instruments such as interviews or audio-recorded observations, the study relied on memory-based reconstruction, reflective journals, and non-recorded classroom interactions.

The focus of the reflection was on how students used and responded to the phrase "*How's your day?*" within authentic school contexts. Students' perceptions were inferred indirectly through noticeable changes in their spontaneous verbal responses, emotional expressions, and narrative engagement during interactions. The findings are presented descriptively and supported by selected conversational excerpts reconstructed from the researcher's reflective notes. This framing positions the study as reflective practitioner inquiry, aligning the methodology with the nature of the data.

Participants

The participants were students from Grades 4, 5, and 6 at an international primary school in Makassar, Indonesia. The total number of students involved over the observation period was 26 students with 16 students from Grade 4, 7 students from 5 and 3 students from Grade 6, all aged between 10 and 12 years old. Most students came from upper-middle to wealthy families, and many had parents who spoke English at home or had studied abroad. These parents often returned to Indonesia to expand family businesses and preferred schools that used English as the medium of instruction.

Despite the strong encouragement for children to speak English at home, only a small number of parents expressed concern about preserving their children's *Bahasa Indonesia* abilities. This sociolinguistic environment reinforced English as the dominant language, both in everyday practice and in its symbolic value. As Norton and De Costa (2018) note, "language learning is always tied to issues of identity, power, and ideology," which helps explain why English became the more privileged choice in the school community.

Because the researcher was their teacher, the students' interactions were natural and familiar, reducing the tension or artificiality that often appears in formal observation. This insider position helped the researcher notice subtle patterns in students' speech, tone, and body language that reflected both linguistic confidence and emotional engagement.

Data Collection

The data were collected over several years of classroom teaching through ongoing, naturalistic observation. The researcher took reflective notes after informal conversations that occurred during non-instructional times such as lunch breaks, recess, or after-school dismissal, when the atmosphere was relaxed and spontaneous communication occurred.

The phrase "*How's your day?*" was usually initiated by the teacher during these informal moments, and over time, students began to use it among themselves and even toward adults, such as their nannies or parents picking them up. This gradual imitation process illustrated a copying and trial phase before it became a natural part of their speech habits.

The researcher documented several memorable interactions that exemplified how students responded to the phrase. For instance, one conversation with Daniel, a Grade 4 student, began with a simple exchange but naturally developed into a story about his family's routines and his

mother's soap business. Another case involved Felicia, who, during an online class, responded to "How's your day?" by expressing her nervousness about a math test before sharing how she played with her brothers earlier.

Such interactions were not recorded as transcripts but reconstructed from memory and reflective journaling, focusing on linguistic cues, emotional tones, and the communicative development students showed over time.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic reflection inspired framework (Caulfield, 2019). After compiling years of anecdotal notes and classroom memories, the researcher identified patterns in how the phrase was understood and used by students. Emerging themes included:

a. Recognition and Care

One emerging theme was that students interpreted the question "How's your day?" as a sign of recognition and care. Many children viewed the greeting as evidence that their teacher noticed them as individuals, not just as members of a classroom group. This sense of being acknowledged contributed to a positive relational climate, where students felt seen and valued. Research shows that simple relational routines, such as greetings, check-ins, or personalized attention can enhance students' sense of belonging and emotional security (Bergman, 2004). For younger learners especially, feeling cared for is closely connected to their willingness to communicate and participate in learning activities. Thus, the phrase functioned not only as a linguistic tool but as an emotional bridge between teacher and student.

b. Emotional Expression

Another theme was students' tendency to move beyond short answers and share personal experiences when responding to the greeting. Instead of replying with simple phrases like "It was good," many children talked about their families, friendships, frustrations, or activities outside school. This shift indicates that routine greetings can create opportunities for emotional expression, allowing children to articulate feelings in a low-pressure context. According to McCarthy (1992), open, dialogic classroom interactions encourage learners to express themselves more freely and develop confidence in their communicative abilities. In this study, the greeting became a conversational space where students could narrate their day, seek empathy, and express emotions, demonstrating the powerful affective role of a simple formulaic question.

The reflection also revealed that the effectiveness of the greeting was strongly shaped by the tone, timing, and emotional state of the students. The teacher quickly learned that the same question "How's your day?" did not always invite the same depth or quality of response. When students appeared tired after a long lesson, preoccupied with a task, or emotionally unsettled, they often struggled to engage fully with the question. In these moments, the teacher adjusted the interaction to better suit the context, shifting to simpler or more situation-appropriate expressions such as "What are you doing?", "Are you okay?", or "Do you need help?". These adaptations showed that classroom language use is not fixed but responsive, reflecting the immediate needs, moods, and readiness of the learners. Such flexibility is consistent with sociocultural perspectives on talk-in-interaction, which emphasize that meaning is co-constructed between teacher and students and constantly shaped by the social situation (Nottingham et al., 2020). The teacher's sensitivity to contextual cues, such as facial expressions, body language, and activity level, demonstrated that effective classroom communication requires ongoing attunement, empathy, and adaptive language use.

c. Language Enrichment

A third theme involved spontaneous vocabulary growth. During these conversations, the teacher would often introduce new words naturally such as "exhausted," "excited," "field trip," or

“*project*” depending on what students shared. This type of incidental learning is known to support deeper vocabulary development because words are introduced within meaningful contexts rather than in isolated lists (Pawley & Syder, 2014). When students connect new vocabulary to their personal stories or experiences, they are more likely to remember and reuse it. The greeting, therefore, served as a practical entry point for contextualized language enrichment, enabling young learners to expand their vocabulary in authentic, meaningful interactions.

d. Imitation and Ownership

Over time, many students began to use the phrase “*How’s your day?*” independently with their peers, teachers, and even family members. This shows both imitation and ownership: students first repeated the expression as modeled, and later used it creatively and spontaneously in new contexts. Such behavior aligns with theories of formulaic language acquisition, which describe how learners adopt routine expressions as whole units before manipulating them for new communicative purposes (Wray, 2012). The students’ willingness to initiate the greeting themselves suggests that they had internalized not only the linguistic form but also the social meaning behind it using it as a genuine gesture of care, curiosity, and connection. This transition from teacher-led to student-initiated use demonstrates the expression’s role in fostering communicative confidence and social awareness.

Data Validation Procedure

To ensure that the interpretations drawn from these interactions were trustworthy and credible, several validation strategies were used. First, prolonged engagement with the setting strengthened the reliability of observations. Because the teacher-researcher had taught the same cohort of students for multiple years, patterns in behavior, language use, and emotional responses were observed over time rather than in isolated moments. Second, triangulation was applied by using multiple data sources. These included observational field notes, informal conversations, reflective journals, and students’ spontaneous use of the expressions in both classroom and non-classroom settings. Comparing these sources helped confirm that the themes were consistent and not dependent on a single interaction (Marn, 2016). Third, peer debriefing was used by discussing preliminary interpretations with trusted colleagues or supervisors, which helped identify possible biases and refine emerging themes. Lastly, analytic memo writing during the coding process helped ensure transparency in how decisions were made, strengthening the auditability of the analysis. Together, these strategies enhanced the credibility, dependability, and overall validity of the qualitative findings.

Ethical Considerations

Because the data came from natural classroom interaction, ethical reflection was applied through confidentiality and sensitivity. Students’ names were replaced with pseudonyms, and no identifying details were revealed. The observations were integrated into the researcher’s regular teaching role, so no additional testing or disruption occurred. The school’s administration was informed of the reflective purpose, and all data were handled respectfully, with students’ well-being prioritized.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Recognition and Care: The Power of Being Noticed

One of the strongest findings that emerged during the observation was how much students valued being noticed. When greeted with “*How’s your day?*”, they often showed visible joy: smiling, making eye contact, or responding eagerly. The phrase signaled that someone cared about them as individuals, not just as learners.

In many Indonesian classrooms, communication between teachers and students tends to be formal and academic. However, this informal greeting helped build emotional closeness. It

showed that the teacher's concern extended beyond the lesson, creating an atmosphere of mutual respect. This supports (Vygotsky, 1978) view that learning is deeply social and that emotional connection enhances interactional meaning.

Case 1: Daniel, Grade 4, waiting for his extracurricular class

Teacher: You're waiting for your extracurricular class?

Daniel: Yes, Ma'am.

Teacher: Cool! So, how's your day?

Daniel: I'm fine. My dad is late bringing me my change of clothes today.

Teacher: How so?

Daniel: He stayed up very late watching football last night. And, I joined him.

Teacher: Really? I think you should watch your sleeping hours for your growth.

Daniel: Yeah, I know, but it was fun.

Teacher: I'm happy for you.

Daniel: My little sister fell asleep half of the time.

Teacher: I bet. She needs her sleeping hours.

Daniel: And it's my mum picking me up today.

Teacher: Is she? How is she?

Daniel: She's okay, just busy with her artistic soap business. We're planning to rent a shop.

Teacher: That's awesome.

In Daniel's exchange, a simple greeting evolved into a meaningful discussion that involved empathy, humor, and shared experiences. The conversation moved from a simple check-in to a mini storytelling session. The phrase "How's your day?" opened a space where Daniel could express his thoughts freely, and the teacher could model natural English interaction. This moment illustrates that authentic classroom communication can blend emotional care with linguistic practice.

2. Emotional Expression and Storytelling

Many students treated "How's your day?" as an invitation to share personal stories. At first, most students gave brief or textbook-style answers like "I'm fine, thank you". However, as familiarity grew, they began to add more personal details, emotions, and opinions. This pattern shows that emotional safety precedes expressive fluency.

Case 2: Felicia, Grade 4, during online class

Teacher: What a diligent girl you are, Felicia.

Felicia: Yes, Ma'am. You're talking to me?

Teacher: How's your day, sweetheart?

Felicia: I'm good, Ma'am, just a little nervous about my math test result.

Teacher: You'll be fine.

Felicia: Thanks, Ma'am. Actually, I'm not that nervous because I played with my brothers before this.

Teacher: You sound like a caring sister. Where are your brothers?

Felicia: They're downstairs. My mum asked them to go down because I'm studying right now.

Teacher: I see.

Felicia's response illustrates how small, caring questions help students feel emotionally validated. Her nervousness was balanced by comfort and support, creating a warm exchange. The dialogue reflects Alston and Searle's (1970) notion of speech acts -language used not just to convey information but to perform relational actions. In this context, "How's your day?" serves as an act of care and encouragement, not simply an inquiry.

Through these exchanges, the classroom atmosphere became more open. Students expressed emotions, connected experiences to language, and learned to manage conversations naturally.

3. Language Enrichment and Spontaneous Learning

The phrase “*How’s your day?*” also worked as a linguistic trigger for vocabulary and grammar development. During these informal chats, students often used simple structures or substituted words that reflected their current level. The teacher responded by gently reformulating or providing the correct term in context.

For instance, when a student described “*an old building that is high,*” the teacher replied, “*You mean tall?*” turning a casual conversation into a quick learning opportunity. This approach aligns with (Walsh, 2011) assertion that “learning is socially constructed through interaction,” emphasizing that cultural and linguistic understanding develops most effectively when students engage in purposeful exchanges. Their speaking accuracy improved naturally through these interactions, without feeling criticized or ashamed.

These micro-corrections created a Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978), where students advanced their English competence through supportive dialogue. They learned that English is not limited to structured lessons; it is alive, flexible, and rooted in everyday experience.

4. Imitation and Ownership: From Copying to Belonging

Over time, the students began using “*How’s your day?*” independently with teachers, friends, and even family members. What began as imitation turned into ownership and identity. This reflects sociocultural view that language becomes internalized through repeated social mediation. As Duff (2011) observes, “language learning is shaped by participation in socially mediated activities,” highlighting how engagement with others drives internal development.

Students would occasionally greet each other in hallways or during pickup time with “*How’s your day?*” sometimes playfully, sometimes sincerely. A few even extended the question to their nannies or parents. This adoption shows that the expression had become meaningful and emotionally resonant.

It also marks a developmental shift: students moved from formulaic speech (copying phrases) to felt communication (using them with real purpose). Their interaction embodied confidence and warmth, demonstrating that emotional engagement supports linguistic fluency.

5. Cultural and Linguistic Implications

In Indonesia’s multilingual context, English often symbolizes modernity and global connection. For students at an international school, English was both a classroom language and a marker of belonging. Many of their parents were English-proficient or internationally educated, which further reinforced English as a social language at home.

However, what this study reveals is that “*How’s your day?*” goes beyond prestige- it becomes a ritual of connection. Students used it not to perform correctness but to show friendliness and comfort. Their growing confidence reflects Mateus’s (2014) translanguaging concept, where learners navigate emotional and linguistic boundaries fluidly. They mixed English with local expressions depending on their mood and context, showing how language functions as a living system, not a static rulebook.

Previous research on classroom discourse has largely focused on how teachers structure interaction through questioning patterns, scaffolding, and instructional talk (Walsh, 2011). Studies in bilingual and multilingual contexts often highlight code-switching, translanguaging, and the strategic use of multiple languages to support learning (Mateus, 2014). While these works demonstrate how teachers guide communication and how students draw on their linguistic repertoires, they rarely examine how a single routine expression can transform from a formal greeting into a meaningful interpersonal practice.

In contrast, the finding in this study shows that the phrase “*How’s your day?*” evolved

beyond its surface function as a greeting. It gradually shifted from a teacher-initiated routine into a spontaneous, student-driven form of communication. This transformation illustrates that the classroom can serve as a bridge between culture and emotion - something that previous research has not explored in depth. Whereas much of the literature treats formulaic expressions as fixed linguistic units stored and retrieved for ease of processing (Wray, 2012), the students in this context used the phrase as a tool to express sincerity, pride, and authentic connection.

Therefore, unlike prior studies that view greetings as part of communicative competence or social etiquette, this study demonstrates that such expressions can unlock emotional openness, encourage identity expression, and foster natural English use. The evolution from formal to spontaneous use highlights a sociocultural dimension that earlier research does not fully address: that routine expressions in an international classroom can become powerful mediators of belonging, confidence, and emotional engagement.

CONCLUSIONS

This study found that the simple greeting “How’s your day?” carried significant social and emotional impact in an international school context. Beyond functioning as a routine expression, it became a tool that fostered care, belonging, and confidence among young learners. Students moved from imitating the phrase to using it sincerely, demonstrating how informal interactions contribute to their developing language identities. These findings imply that language learning is strengthened when emotional engagement and authentic communication are present, not just exposure to English or formal instruction. Teachers in international and bilingual schools can therefore use small talk, greetings, and spontaneous dialogues to build students’ pragmatic awareness, empathy, and comfort in expressing themselves in English.

However, this reflective study is limited by its focus on a single phrase, a single school, and a single teacher-researcher perspective, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Because the data were drawn from observations and reflective notes, further research using interviews, recordings, or comparative settings would provide richer evidence. Future studies could explore how similar routine expressions function across different types of schools, age groups, or cultural backgrounds, and how parents perceive these language habits at home. Such research would deepen our understanding of how everyday expressions shape children’s linguistic, emotional, and social development across varied contexts.

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