

Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence in an Early EFL Classroom: A Case Study of an Extra-Hour Conversation Program

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Abstract

Research on English language teaching in primary school contexts has increasingly emphasized the importance of early communicative and intercultural learning. However, limited studies have examined how supplementary English programs function as micro-level language policy spaces in developing intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Situated in the Indonesian early EFL context, where English at the primary level is optional and unevenly implemented, this study investigates an extra-hour English Conversation Program in a private primary school. This article reports a qualitative case study that explores how the program operates as a micro-level language policy space in shaping students' intercultural communicative competence, as well as their

linguistic development and learning motivation. It also examines how students experience the program differently, and how teacher agency, institutional practices, and socio-cultural factors mediate participation, equity, and sustainability. Data were collected through classroom observations, teacher interviews, and analysis of instructional practices. The findings indicate that the program creates meaningful opportunities for early intercultural encounters through interactive speaking activities and exposure to authentic language use, fostering students' confidence, willingness to communicate, and openness to cultural diversity. However, students' participation is uneven, influenced by prior English exposure, teacher mediation, and institutional support. This study argues that the development of intercultural communicative competence in early EFL classrooms is not solely a result of increased language exposure but is shaped by locally enacted language policies and everyday classroom practices. The findings highlight the importance of designing equitable and sustainable supplementary programs to support ICC development in primary EFL contexts.

Keywords: *Intercultural Communicative Competence, English Conversation Program, Primary School Context*

INTRODUCTION

Work in language policy and planning (LPP) is increasingly moving from macro-analysis of national policy documents to a micro-focus. Recent research has investigated the implementation of these policies in local education. This 'shift' is grounded in a realization that language policies do not work as "instruments" that are fixed or neutral even when it come to the process of learning a language within an institution. Furthermore, in such cases, they are construed, mediated, and constructed by local agents such as school principals and teachers in their mundane activities throughout the day (Jeong & Lindemann, 2024; Lytra & Gelir, 2023; Johnson, 2013). Practically, in this context, schools play a dual role as policy implementers and active actors for policy formation, where institutional values, pedagogical beliefs, and contextual constraints directly influence how policy objectives are realized into classroom learning.

In English language education, this micro-perspective is highly relevant—particularly in the context of English as a foreign language (EFL)—as teacher interpretations and classroom decisions shape students' opportunities to learn and use the language directly from an authentic source. In Indonesia, English plays a crucial role as a global language that opens access to international communication, technology, education, and employment opportunities (Zein et al., 2020a; Liddicoat & Baldauf, 2008). Aligning with these global demands, national education policy mandates English instruction at the secondary level, while the introduction of English at the primary level is optional, dependent on institutional readiness and local needs, especially in the private school context. Consequently, English language learning outcomes in Indonesia primary schools remain uneven, reflecting systemic inequalities in resource distribution, teacher readiness, instructional time allocation, and curricular orientation (Harlina & Yusuf, 2020; Zein et al., 2020).

Although English is not an official language in Indonesia, it holds significant symbolic and pragmatic value, positioning it as a crucial subject in national education policy. However, English language learning outcomes in Indonesia still exhibit significant disparities across urban-rural divides, and between public and private schools, as well as among communities with different socioeconomic backgrounds. In fact, many schools struggle to develop students' communicative competence due to limited time for English learning, high teacher workloads, large class sizes. Furthermore, a limited curricular focus often prioritizes reading and grammar over communicative interaction and speaking skills (Andika & Yulia, 2025; Harlina & Yusuf, 2020). Compounding these issues, not all English teachers at the elementary level have specialized training in EFL pedagogy, leading to variations in the quality of instruction. Thus, these systemic challenges highlight the gap between national policy aspirations and their actual implementation in the classroom.

In response to these facts, local education stakeholders are increasingly seeking innovative solutions beyond the national

curriculum. One strategy, particularly in a private Islamic school in urban areas like East Jakarta, is the implementation of supplementary programs, including extra hours of conversational English with a native speaker, to fulfill the needs. Hence, this initiative is designed to improve students' speaking skills, expand exposure to functional and authentic language usage directly from native speaker, thereby fostering confidence in oral communication among students. Thus, the school is attempting to address the limitations of the core curriculum while adapting to global demands for students' English language competency by providing additional learning time, both integrated into the learning schedule and through extracurricular activities.

These practices materialize language policy at the micro-level, where local actors—including principals, teachers, and community stakeholders—interpret and adjust wider-institutional objectives based on their beliefs and perceptions of the school's identity. At this level, policy implementation serves as an exercise of agency, as teachers and school leaders establish specific pedagogical values for English within the cultural context of their schools. For instance, schools that prioritize conversational English programs often project that adopters see English as a means for maintaining global competitiveness and social status. This institutional positioning is frequently driven by parental demand, particularly among the middle class, who view English proficiency as a vital form of social capital and a vehicle for their children's future mobility.

However, these efforts are not entirely neutral. While they may open new learning opportunities, they can also reproduce social class, gender, and linguistic identity inequalities. For example, richer schools can compete and win against poorer ones that cannot afford to hire or train English teachers. This way, students from higher socioeconomic strata benefit more from conversation programs, as they often have supportive home environments, access to private tutoring sites, or prior exposure to the English language through digital means. In addition, students' participation can be influenced by gender norms and identity positions in the

classroom, affecting their confidence in speaking. This complexity highlights the need to examine whether, and to what extent, programs are effective, as well as for whom and under what conditions they can produce equitable learning outcomes.

A persistent challenge in Indonesian EFL learning in elementary schools is the scarcity of meaningful oral interactions. Classroom practices often place greater emphasis on vocabulary memorization, grammatical accuracy, and reading comprehension, leaving very little room for oral communication and spontaneous language use, as stated by Andika & Yulia (2025) and Zein et al. (2020) thus, the local initiatives represent concrete examples of language policy implementation at the micro-level, where schools reinterpret the objectives of national language policies and translate them into localized pedagogical practices aligned with their institutional identities, available resources, and beliefs about language learning (Johnson, 2013; Liddicoat, 2007). Rather than passively complying with curriculum directives, school leaders and teachers, demonstrate agency by creating additional learning spaces that prioritize interaction, confidence, and authentic language use for students. Importantly, these programs also reshape assessment practices by having teachers evaluate students' speaking performance through observation, interaction, and formative feedback, rather than relying solely on standardized, literacy-oriented assessment instruments.

Drawing on the shift in language policy and planning from macro-level policy to everyday classroom practices, this study positions an extra-hour English Conversation Program in a primary school as a micro-level policy space where language learning, participation, and intercultural meaning-making are actively negotiated by local actors. While previous studies have emphasized teacher agency and policy enactment, there has been limited focus on how supplementary programs in early EFL contexts simultaneously shape students' intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and reproduce or challenge inequalities in participation and access.

This study offers a novel contribution by explicitly examining the intersection between micro-level language policy enactment and the development of ICC in elementary classrooms, particularly within a supplementary program setting that operates beyond formal curriculum structures. Rather than treating such programs as inherently beneficial, this study critically investigates how they are experienced unevenly by students and how issues of equity, participation, and sustainability are mediated through teacher practices, institutional decisions, and socio-cultural conditions. In doing so, the study moves beyond a purely pedagogical perspective and situates intercultural learning within broader concerns of educational inequality and policy implementation.

More specifically, this study addresses the following research questions: *First*, how does the extra-hour English Conversation Program function as a micro-level language policy space in shaping students' linguistic development, motivation, and intercultural communicative competence in an early EFL classroom? *Second*, how are students' experiences and participation in the program unevenly distributed, and what factors contribute to these differences? *Third*, how do teacher agency, institutional practices, and socio-cultural contexts influence issues of equity and sustainability in the implementation of the program?

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore how micro-level language policy is enacted within an early EFL classroom context. A qualitative approach was selected to provide an in-depth understanding of how an extra-hour English Conversation Program is interpreted and implemented by local teachers and native speakers, particularly in shaping students' speaking practices and intercultural communicative competence in an Islamic primary school setting. The case study design enables the researcher to examine this program as a contextual and dynamic social practice, highlighting how language policy is negotiated,

mediated, and realized through everyday classroom interactions within a specific institutional context.

Research Context

This study was conducted in a private Islamic elementary school in East Jakarta that implements an extra-hour English Conversation Program as part of its institutional language policy. This school was purposively selected as the case because it represents a locally initiated response to the limited and optional status of English at the primary level in Indonesia, where schools are required to interpret and enact national policy based on their own resources, beliefs, and priorities. The case is particularly significant because the program is not merely an additional activity, but a structured policy initiative involving regular sessions and collaboration with native English-speaking teachers, making it a rich site for examining how language policy is enacted in practice.

At the same time, the case can be considered both unique and representative. It is unique in its institutional commitment to providing sustained intercultural interaction through direct engagement with native speakers, which is not commonly available in many primary school settings. However, it is also representative of a broader trend in Indonesian private schools, where supplementary English programs are increasingly developed to compensate for limited instructional time and to meet parental and societal expectations.

The use of a qualitative case study design enables an in-depth exploration of the complexity of this phenomenon. Specifically, it allows the researcher to capture how policy is interpreted and negotiated by school actors, how classroom interactions unfold in real time during the program, and how intercultural communicative competence develops through everyday practices. By focusing on a single case in detail, this study reveals the dynamic interplay among policy enactment, teacher agency, student participation, and intercultural learning, which might not be fully captured by broader or more general research approaches.

Population and Sampling

Participants in this study were drawn from a population of 280 Grade 3 and Grade 4 students at a private Islamic elementary school in East Jakarta, distributed across five parallel classes (A–E), of approximately 28 students in each. These grade levels were selected based on their developmental readiness for early communicative interaction. Having already been introduced to basic English, these learners are beginning to engage in simple oral communication, making them an ideal cohort for examining the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in an early EFL context.

This qualitative case study employed purposive cluster sampling by selecting intact classes as the unit of analysis. Two classes, Class C and Class D, were chosen as representative groups because they reflected average classroom conditions in terms of students' academic performance, participation, and English proficiency, rather than extreme cases (e.g., high-achieving, or remedial classes). This selection allowed the study to capture typical learning dynamics within the program.

A total of 56 students (28 from each class) participated in the study. The students generally came from middle socio-economic backgrounds, with varying degrees of prior exposure to English both inside and outside school. While some students had additional support such as private tutoring or informal exposure through media, others relied primarily on school-based instruction, resulting in diverse levels of confidence, and speaking ability.

To enable in-depth analysis, several focal students were purposefully selected from each class based on their speaking proficiency levels (high, medium, and low), as well as their participation patterns during classroom interaction. These focal students were not treated as separate subjects but as analytical lenses to better understand variation in engagement and learning experiences within the same instructional context.

In addition to students, the study also involved local English teachers and four native English-speaking instructors who played a

central role in the implementation of the program. The local teachers were responsible for classroom management, instructional scaffolding, and mediating students' understanding by drawing on their knowledge of students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Meanwhile, the native-speaking instructors provided authentic language input, pronunciation models, and intercultural exposure through interactive communicative activities. The collaboration between local teachers and native speakers created a co-constructed learning environment that supported both linguistic development and intercultural learning.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a systematic thematic analysis following several iterative stages. First, all data from classroom observations, teacher interviews, and speaking assessments were transcribed and organized. An initial open coding process was conducted to identify meaningful units related to classroom interaction, speaking performance, assessment practices, and policy enactment. These codes were then grouped into broader categories through axial coding to establish relationships across data sources.

In the next stage, themes were developed by identifying recurring patterns across observations, interview responses, and students' speaking performance. The analysis moved back and forth between data and emerging themes to ensure that the findings remained grounded in the data. Particular attention was given to how interactional practices, teacher mediation, and institutional decisions reflected the enactment of micro-level language policy in the classroom.

To ensure validity, data triangulation was applied by comparing findings from observations, interviews, and speaking assessments. For example, patterns observed in students' participation and interaction were cross-checked with teachers' explanations from interviews and supported by descriptive evidence from speaking performance results. This integration allowed the study to capture both pedagogical practices and their impact on students' communicative development.

Students' speaking performance was analyzed descriptively using the analytic rubric (comprehensibility, accuracy, appropriateness, and fluency) to identify recurring patterns rather than to generate statistical generalizations. These descriptive results were then interpreted alongside qualitative findings to provide a more comprehensive understanding of students' communicative competence.

Finally, all themes were interpreted through a micro-level language policy perspective, emphasizing how teacher agency, classroom interaction, and institutional practices function as sites of policy enactment. This approach ensured that the analysis not only described classroom practices but also explained how intercultural communicative competence is shaped by locally situated decisions, constraints, and pedagogical actions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Extra-Hour English Conversation Program as a Micro-Level Language Policy Space for Intercultural Communicative Competence Development

This study demonstrates that the extra-hour English Conversation Program functions as a micro-level language policy space that shapes students' linguistic development, motivation, and intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in early EFL classrooms. Overall, the findings reveal six interrelated outcomes: (1) improvements in students' oral proficiency, (2) increased motivation and confidence, (3) the development of intercultural awareness, (4) uneven participation among learners, (5) the central role of teacher mediation, and (6) sustainability challenges in program implementation. Taken together, these findings illustrate that while the program creates meaningful opportunities for communicative and intercultural learning, its impact is mediated by pedagogical practices and contextual factors.

Linguistic Improvement

The findings indicate that students demonstrate noticeable gains in pronunciation accuracy, fluency, and spontaneous speech production. Through interactive activities such as role-plays,

games, and pair work, learners are encouraged to negotiate meaning and respond in real time, moving beyond memorized expressions toward more flexible language use. These results are consistent with the Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1985) and the Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996), which emphasize the importance of comprehensible input and meaningful interaction in second language acquisition. Furthermore, classroom observations show reduced hesitation and increased willingness to communicate, supporting previous studies on communicative language teaching (Fauzi & Ridwan, 2025; Nggawu & Thao, 2023; Yang, 2014).

Student Motivation and Confidence

The program also contributes significantly to students' motivation and emotional readiness to use English. While many learners initially experience anxiety, they gradually become more willing to take risks and engage in communication. The use of enjoyable and meaningful activities, such as storytelling and simulations, fosters a positive learning environment and enhances students' engagement. As a result, learners begin to use English beyond the classroom context, indicating a shift in how they perceive the language. This finding aligns with Xu & Gao (2014), who argue that motivation and identity development are closely interconnected, as well as with studies highlighting the role of communicative activities in increasing learners' confidence (Aulia & El-Yunusi, 2025; Agustin, 2023).

Intercultural Awareness Development

In addition to linguistic and affective gains, the program facilitates the development of intercultural awareness. Interaction with native English-speaking teachers provides students with exposure to authentic language use, including pronunciation, discourse patterns, and culturally embedded expressions. Consequently, learners become more open to cultural differences and begin to view English as a medium for global communication. This supports previous findings emphasizing the importance of authentic interaction in fostering intercultural communicative competence (Mahrus & Rosayanti, 2021; Wulandari et al., 2022).

Uneven Participation

Despite these positive outcomes, the findings reveal that participation is not equally distributed among students. More confident and proficient learners tend to dominate classroom interaction, while quieter students participate less actively. This imbalance is influenced by factors such as prior exposure to English, individual confidence, and socio-cultural background. These findings suggest that increased exposure alone is insufficient to ensure equitable learning opportunities.

Teacher Mediation and Agency

The study highlights the crucial role of teacher mediation in shaping students' learning experiences. Teachers employ various scaffolding strategies, including feedback, modeling, and translanguaging practices, to support comprehension and participation (Ramadhan et al., 2022). Moreover, collaboration between local teachers and native speakers enhances the quality of interaction and reflects how language policy is enacted in practice (Guerrero & Camargo-Abello, 2023; Johnson, 2013). This underscores the importance of teacher agency in mediating the relationship between policy and classroom practice.

Sustainability Issues

Finally, the findings point to sustainability challenges, particularly the program's reliance on native speakers. While native speakers contribute to authentic input, previous studies indicate that they may lack pedagogical familiarity with local contexts (Ismar & Rahmatillah, 2023). This highlights the need to strengthen local teacher capacity to ensure the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of the program.

The findings of this study provide a nuanced understanding of how an extra-hour English Conversation Program operates as a micro-level language policy space in early EFL education. Rather than simply demonstrating that increased exposure leads to improved outcomes, this study shows that the development of intercultural communicative competence is shaped by a complex

interplay of pedagogical practices, teacher agency, and socio-cultural factors.

In terms of linguistic development, the findings support established theories of second language acquisition, particularly the roles of input and interaction (Krashen, 1985; Long, 1996). However, this study extends previous research by demonstrating that such improvements are contingent upon the quality of interaction and the extent to which learners are actively engaged in meaningful communication. This is consistent with research in the Indonesian context, which highlights the effectiveness of communicative approaches compared to traditional grammar-focused instruction (Dewi et al., 2025; Zein et al., 2020).

The findings related to motivation and confidence further emphasize the importance of affective factors in early language learning. The program enables students to develop more positive language identities, supporting the view that motivation and identity are dynamically interconnected (Xu & Gao, 2014). At the same time, the uneven distribution of these benefits suggests that communicative programs do not automatically produce equitable outcomes. These findings challenge assumptions that increased exposure alone is sufficient to enhance all learners' participation and success.

Regarding intercultural learning, the study confirms that authentic interaction plays a significant role in fostering intercultural awareness (Wulandari et al., 2022). However, it also highlights that intercultural competence does not emerge solely from exposure to native speakers. Instead, it requires intentional pedagogical mediation and context-sensitive implementation. In this sense, the study contributes to broader discussions on intercultural learning by emphasizing the importance of localized classroom practices.

From a language policy perspective, the findings illustrate how schools function as active agents in interpreting and enacting policy at the micro level (Johnson, 2013; Liddicoat & Baldauf, 2008). The program represents a localized response to structural limitations in the national curriculum, particularly the limited

instructional time for English at the primary level. Nevertheless, the study also reveals potential tensions between innovation and equity. Without careful design and facilitation, such programs may inadvertently reproduce existing inequalities, as suggested in previous research on linguistic hierarchies and educational access (Asmi et al., 2022).

Pedagogically, the findings suggest that effective early EFL programs should prioritize structured interaction, inclusive participation, and active teacher mediation. Strategies such as turn-taking, differentiated support, and translanguaging can help ensure that all students have equitable opportunities to participate. In addition, reducing reliance on native speakers by investing in local teacher development is essential for program sustainability.

Finally, this study contributes to wider discussions on educational equity by demonstrating that access to meaningful communicative experiences must be intentionally designed. Supplementary programs have the potential to enhance learning outcomes, but their benefits depend on how inclusively they are implemented.

Future Directions

Future research should explore the long-term impact of similar programs on students' intercultural communicative competence, as well as examine variations across different institutional and socio-economic contexts. Further studies may also investigate how teacher professional development can better support the integration of intercultural learning in early EFL classrooms.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights that extra-hour English Conversation Programs function not merely as supplementary activities, but as dynamic micro-level language policy spaces that shape young learners' intercultural communicative competence (ICC). The main contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that the development of ICC in early EFL contexts is not simply the result of increased exposure to English, but is critically mediated by teacher

agency, interactional practices, and locally situated policy enactment. By foregrounding the interplay between pedagogy, policy, and intercultural learning, this study extends existing literature that often treats conversation programs as purely linguistic interventions.

Practically, the findings suggest that such programs foster students' oral proficiency, confidence, and intercultural awareness when designed as interactive, low-anxiety, meaning-oriented learning spaces. However, the data also reveals that without deliberate instructional design, these benefits may be unevenly distributed. Factors such as unequal participation, an over-reliance on native-speaker instructors, and institutional pressures towards performance-oriented outcomes may limit the program's inclusivity and long-term sustainability.

Therefore, this study recommends that schools strengthen structured, equitable participation strategies and invest in local teacher professional development and reduce overdependence on native speakers by building internal pedagogical capacity. Additionally, program design should prioritize inclusivity by ensuring equitable access, scaffolding for less confident learners, and adopting culturally responsive teaching practices. Future research may further explore the longitudinal impacts of these programs and examine their operation across diverse socio-educational contexts.

Overall, this study underscores that the success of early EFL intercultural learning initiatives depends not only on program availability, but on how they are enacted, mediated, and sustained within specific institutional and socio-cultural contexts.

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