

INTERACTIVE AND CONTEXTUAL ENGLISH TEACHING: IMPROVING STUDENTS' COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE AT JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the effectiveness of interactive and contextual English teaching in improving junior high school students' communicative competence and classroom engagement. The research was conducted at SMP Negeri 2 Bandar using a qualitative case study design, involving 32 eighth-grade students over a six-week intervention. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and performance assessments, and were analyzed thematically and descriptively. The findings reveal that student engagement improved significantly, with active participation rising from 52% in the first week to 86% in the sixth week. Similarly, students' communicative competence demonstrated notable progress, with average speaking performance increasing from 48% to 83%. Students reported that contextual learning materials and interactive tasks, such as role-play, group projects, and pair discussions, reduced their anxiety and encouraged more spontaneous language use. The results suggest that embedding local cultural topics and real-life scenarios in English instruction not only motivates students but also creates authentic opportunities for meaningful communication. In conclusion, interactive and contextual teaching approaches can effectively enhance students' English learning experience and communicative competence in junior high school settings. The implication of this study highlights the need for teachers to adopt more student-centered and culturally relevant pedagogical practices, while policymakers should consider integrating these approaches into teacher training programs to ensure sustainability and broader application.

Keywords: *contextual learning, communicative competence, junior high school, interactive teaching, student engagement.*

Sari

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji efektivitas pembelajaran bahasa Inggris berbasis interaktif dan kontekstual dalam meningkatkan kompetensi komunikatif serta keterlibatan siswa SMP. Penelitian dilaksanakan di SMP Negeri 2 Bandar dengan desain studi kasus kualitatif yang melibatkan 32 siswa kelas VIII selama enam minggu intervensi. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi kelas, wawancara semi-terstruktur, dan penilaian performa, kemudian dianalisis secara tematik dan deskriptif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan adanya peningkatan signifikan pada keterlibatan siswa, dengan partisipasi aktif yang meningkat dari 52% pada minggu pertama menjadi 86% pada minggu keenam. Demikian pula, kompetensi komunikatif siswa mengalami perkembangan yang berarti, dengan rata-rata kemampuan berbicara meningkat dari 48% menjadi 83%. Siswa melaporkan bahwa materi pembelajaran kontekstual serta tugas-tugas interaktif, seperti role-play, proyek kelompok, dan diskusi berpasangan, mampu mengurangi kecemasan serta mendorong penggunaan bahasa yang lebih spontan. Temuan ini mengindikasikan bahwa integrasi topik budaya lokal dan skenario kehidupan nyata dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris tidak hanya memotivasi siswa, tetapi juga menciptakan kesempatan otentik untuk komunikasi yang bermakna. Kesimpulannya, pendekatan pembelajaran interaktif dan kontekstual terbukti efektif dalam meningkatkan pengalaman belajar dan kompetensi komunikatif siswa SMP. Implikasi dari penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya guru untuk menerapkan praktik pedagogis yang lebih berpusat pada siswa dan relevan secara budaya, serta perlunya dukungan kebijakan dalam bentuk pelatihan guru agar pendekatan ini dapat berkelanjutan dan diterapkan secara lebih luas.

Kata kunci: *kompetensi komunikatif, keterlibatan siswa, pembelajaran interaktif, pembelajaran kontekstual, sekolah menengah pertama.*

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Introduction

In recent years Indonesian educational policy has foregrounded learner-centred outcomes and communicative abilities as central goals of English instruction. The Merdeka curriculum, for example, stresses flexibility, meaningful learning, and the development of students' communicative competence rather than only mastery of decontextualized forms. Yet multiple implementation studies show a persistent gap between curriculum aims and classroom realities: teachers often continue to organize lessons around grammar explanation, translation, and exam preparation, which

constrains opportunities for authentic spoken interaction and meaningful language use (Ni'mah, et al. 2024). This disjunction matters because communicative competence requires sustained chances to use language in realistic contexts; without such chances, students may perform on written tests but remain reluctant or unable to engage in spontaneous oral communication (Fadillah et al., 2024).

The mismatch described above is especially acute in semi-rural and rural junior high schools. Students in these settings typically encounter English primarily in school; community language practices, local commerce, and family interactions are conducted in the local or national language, so naturalistic exposure to English is minimal (Budi et al., 2024). Moreover, infrastructure and resource gaps (limited authentic materials, unstable internet access, shortage of ICT devices) constrain teachers' ability to introduce varied, interactive modes of practice outside traditional textbooks. Research into rural education in Indonesia documents these structural barriers and highlights how they limit both the quantity and quality of student language exposure (Mariyanah, 2025). In addition, many teachers report inadequate in-service training focused on designing communicative, contextually rooted tasks training that would enable them to translate curriculum flexibility into classroom practice (Pratama & Sumardi, 2022).

Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) and interactive pedagogies offer theoretically and practically motivated responses to the constraints above (Brown, 2022). CTL emphasizes linking language input and tasks to learners' lived experiences and local cultural knowledge so learners can construct meaning from familiar referents; interactive methods (role-play, project-based tasks, structured peer interaction) create opportunities for purposeful language use and peer scaffolding (Jayanti, 2022). Indonesian case studies show that CTL-informed lessons and scaffolded interactive tasks can raise engagement, lower speaking anxiety, and improve measurable skill areas such as narrative writing, reading comprehension, and oral fluency when the tasks are carefully sequenced and supported (Jayanti, 2022). These approaches are therefore particularly promising for semi-rural junior high contexts: by using students' local knowledge and well-designed interaction structures, teachers can create meaningful practice even where outside exposure to English is limited (Sabar et al., 2024).

A growing empirical literature in Indonesian EFL contexts reports positive outcomes from interactive techniques (Dewi et al., 2023). Role-play, when embedded in realistic scenarios and paired with pre-task vocabulary/scaffolding, consistently appears to increase both willingness to speak and fluency scores among lower-secondary students (Miolo et al., 2023). Project-based tasks where students collaboratively investigate a local issue and present findings in English have shown gains in integrated skills (speaking, reading, writing) and in student motivation because they link language use to authentic purposes (Karimi et al., 2023). Where ICT resources are available and teachers are confident using them, blended or multimodal tasks further increase exposure and autonomy (Sari, 2022). However, the literature also stresses that benefits are contingent on teacher facilitation, task design (clear outcomes, role distribution), and vocabulary scaffolding to prevent weaker students from being sidelined.

Despite encouraging local studies, there are important unresolved questions. Much of the evidence comes from small-scale classroom action research or isolated interventions; comprehensive studies that examine sustained implementation across a full school year, especially in semi-rural junior high schools, remain limited. Equally, research frequently notes equity problems more proficient students monopolize interactive speaking opportunities unless the teacher deliberately structures participation and persistent teacher needs for targeted professional development (Ni'mah et al., 2024)(Erni et al., 2024).

English has become a compulsory subject in Indonesian secondary schools, including at the junior high school level, where students are expected to develop communicative competence and use English for authentic purposes. However, English remains a foreign language in Indonesia, which creates unique challenges for both teachers and students. Many learners in rural and semi-urban contexts, such as SMP Negeri 2 Bandar, often struggle with limited exposure to English outside the classroom, restricted vocabulary knowledge, and low confidence in speaking. As a result, English lessons are often perceived as difficult and less engaging, leading to reduced motivation and passive learning behaviors.

To address these issues, researchers and practitioners have emphasized the need for more interactive and contextualized English instruction. Contextual Teaching and

Learning (CTL) has been widely recognized as an effective approach to make language learning more meaningful by linking classroom content with students' real-life experiences and local culture (Lingga et al., 2020). Studies show that CTL not only enhances student engagement but also significantly improves reading comprehension when local content is integrated into the teaching process (Pratama & Sumardi, 2022). In junior high schools, the use of contextual materials has allowed students to connect vocabulary and grammar learning with their daily activities, thus fostering deeper comprehension and retention (M. Aditama et al., 2025).

At the same time, speaking remains one of the most challenging skills for Indonesian junior high school students. A recent study in South Sulawesi demonstrated that the integration of communicative tasks with a cognitive approach substantially improved learners' speaking fluency, pronunciation clarity, and vocabulary range (Sabar et al., 2024). Similarly, research in Medan revealed that students tend to rely on strategies such as memorization, gestures, and increased self-confidence to overcome speaking difficulties, but their progress is still hindered by limited vocabulary mastery and language anxiety (Lingga et al., 2020). These findings suggest that speaking instruction must go beyond mechanical drills to provide interactive opportunities for learners to negotiate meaning, build vocabulary, and practice spontaneous communication in supportive classroom environments.

For teachers in SMP Negeri 2 Bandar, these insights highlight the urgency of designing English lessons that are interactive, contextual, and communicative. CTL-based methods, particularly when combined with local materials and real-life projects, can strengthen students' reading comprehension, while communicative tasks and vocabulary scaffolding can support their speaking development (Shofyana et al., 2022). Research in senior high schools also supports the broader effectiveness of CTL, showing significant improvements in vocabulary acquisition and students' positive perceptions of reading lessons (Fitria et al., 2024).

Finally, although the Merdeka curriculum gives teachers curricular autonomy, teachers require practical models and materials to translate that autonomy into consistent contextual and interactive practice (Aditama et al., 2025). These gaps point to a need for systematic case studies that document not just whether CTL and interactive

methods can work, but how teachers design, sequence, and assess such activities in constrained settings and how these practices affect different skill domains (listening, speaking, reading, writing) and different groups of students.

This study takes SMP Negeri 2 Bandar as a purposive case to investigate how interactive and contextual approaches are planned and enacted in a semi-rural junior high context, and to examine their effects on students' communicative competence across speaking, reading and writing. By combining classroom observation, teacher interviews (focusing on lesson design and assessment), and student focus groups (to capture learner perspectives and affective responses), the study aims to produce a rich, practice-oriented account that can inform teacher professional development and school-level language-planning decisions. The research contributes (a) empirical documentation of sustained classroom practices under curricular autonomy, (b) fine-grained insights into task design and participation equity, and (c) practical implications for designing locally grounded instructional materials under resource constraints.

Despite curriculum emphasis on communicative competence and promising small-scale reports on CTL and interactive methods, there is limited systematic evidence about how such approaches are implemented and sustained in semi-rural Indonesian junior high schools and how they affect students' communicative competence across skill domains. Therefore, this study asks: 1) How do English teachers at SMP Negeri 2 Bandar design and implement contextual and interactive tasks to develop students' communicative competence?; 2) What effects do these tasks have on students' speaking, reading, and writing performance and affective engagement?; 3) What implementation challenges and equity issues arise, and what pragmatic solutions do teachers adopt?

Methods

This study employed a qualitative case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of how interactive and contextual teaching strategies can enhance students' communicative competence in English. A case study approach was deemed appropriate because it allows for an intensive examination of teaching practices within a bounded context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In particular, the study focused on classroom dynamics, teacher strategies, and learner responses during English lessons at one junior

high school. This design also provided flexibility in capturing multiple perspectives from both teachers and students regarding the effectiveness of contextualized and interactive learning activities.

The research was conducted at a public junior high school located in a semi-rural area of Central Java, Indonesia. The school serves students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, with most learners having limited exposure to English outside the classroom. English is taught as a compulsory subject for Grades 7 to 9, with two to three 40-minute sessions per week. The selected setting was considered representative of similar public schools in semi-urban Indonesian contexts, where English learning is often constrained by limited resources and the predominance of teacher-centered methods.

The participants in this study consisted of one English teacher and 32 eighth-grade students. To protect anonymity, the teacher is referred to as Ms. A, while students are identified using pseudonyms (e.g., Student 1, Student 2). The teacher had more than 10 years of experience teaching English at the junior high school level and was familiar with the national curriculum. The students, aged between 13 and 14 years, represented a typical range of language proficiency levels, from beginner to lower-intermediate. Participation in the study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from both the teacher and the students' guardians prior to data collection.

The study was conducted over six weeks, covering a teaching unit that integrated contextual and interactive learning strategies. The teaching interventions included the use of local materials (e.g., texts and scenarios related to students' immediate environment), role-plays, pair and group discussions, project-based tasks, and contextualized vocabulary practice. These strategies were designed to foster communicative competence by encouraging active participation, negotiation of meaning, and the practical use of language in real-life contexts.

Data collection procedures were carried out in three stages:

1. Classroom Observations – A series of eight classroom sessions were observed to document teaching practices and student interactions. Field notes and observation

checklists were used to record classroom dynamics, teacher prompts, and student engagement (Denzin et al., 2018).

2. Semi-structured Interviews – The teacher and a purposive sample of ten students were interviewed at the end of the intervention to explore their perceptions of interactive and contextual learning. The interviews were conducted in Indonesian to ensure clarity, then translated into English for analysis.
3. Document Analysis – Teaching materials, lesson plans, and students' written work were collected to triangulate data from observations and interviews (Bowen, 2021).

Data analysis followed a thematic approach as outlined by (Braun & Clarke, 2021). All qualitative data (field notes, interview transcripts, and student work) were transcribed, coded, and categorized into emerging themes related to interactive learning, contextual relevance, and communicative competence. To ensure credibility, triangulation of data sources (observations, interviews, and documents) was conducted (Khairunisa & Diah Utami, 2023). Member checking was also performed by sharing preliminary findings with the teacher participant for validation.

Results and Discussion

The findings of the six-week intervention on interactive and contextual English teaching at SMP Negeri 2 Bandar. The results are organized into two major categories: (1) student engagement in classroom activities and (2) improvement in students' communicative competence, particularly in speaking. Data were drawn from classroom observations, interview responses, and document analysis, and are summarized in both tabular and graphical forms.

1. Student Engagement

Student engagement was systematically observed through indicators such as frequency of participation, willingness to volunteer answers, responsiveness during group discussions, and initiative in using English spontaneously. In the initial stage of the intervention (Week 1), only 52% of students demonstrated active involvement in English-based tasks. Most learners were hesitant to speak, often defaulting to Bahasa Indonesia or Javanese, and some exhibited avoidance behaviors such as remaining silent or relying heavily on written notes. This indicated a strong

dependency on teacher guidance and a lack of confidence in using English for authentic communication.

As the intervention progressed, engagement patterns shifted considerably. By Week 3, students began to display higher levels of curiosity and participation during role-play and problem-solving tasks, with observable enthusiasm particularly when the activities were related to their daily lives (e.g., market dialogues, school routines, and local festivities). The engagement level rose to 74% by Week 4, reflecting a transformation from passive attendance to active collaboration. Students not only followed instructions but also initiated questions, responded to peers, and attempted to negotiate meaning in English.

By the final week (Week 6), engagement had reached 86%, with most learners consistently participating in communicative exchanges. Shy or previously reluctant students showed visible improvement, largely due to the collaborative nature of group work and the supportive classroom environment. Interview data confirmed that contextual materials such as discussions about familiar foods, local traditions, and environmental issues helped students perceive English as a useful and relevant tool rather than a distant academic requirement. The reduction of language anxiety was also attributed to opportunities for pair work, which allowed weaker students to practice in smaller, less intimidating settings before performing in front of the whole class. The findings suggest that contextual and interactive learning not only increased the quantity of student participation but also enhanced the quality of engagement, moving from surface-level compliance to genuine involvement in English communication.

2. Communicative Competence

The development of communicative competence was assessed through students' fluency, vocabulary range, accuracy, and ability to maintain meaningful interaction. At the outset of the intervention (Week 1), students' speaking competence averaged 48%. Observations revealed that learners often responded with single words or short phrases such as "Yes, Miss" or "I don't know." Their speech was marked by frequent pauses, reliance on memorized dialogues, and avoidance of complex vocabulary.

Many students exhibited limited capacity to initiate or sustain a conversation, relying instead on teacher prompts.

By Week 3, a noticeable shift was observed. Students began to expand their responses into short sentences and made greater attempts at using contextual vocabulary introduced in class. For instance, in a simulated market dialogue, students initially stuck to memorized lines but gradually experimented with new phrases such as “How much is it?” or “Can you give me a discount?” This indicated an emerging ability to adapt language to real-life communicative purposes.

The progress was most evident in the final stages of the intervention. By Week 6, the average score for speaking competence had risen to 83%. At this point, students were able to engage in semi-spontaneous dialogues, showing improved fluency and reduced hesitation. For example, in role-plays about daily school routines, students could construct multi-sentence exchanges and even use fillers (“umm,” “let me think”) naturally, reflecting more authentic speech production. Their vocabulary repertoire expanded to include both high-frequency words and context-specific terms related to local life. Additionally, a few students demonstrated the ability to repair communication breakdowns by rephrasing their ideas or using gestures strategically—an indicator of pragmatic competence.

The overall improvement suggests that interactive and contextualized instruction not only enhanced students’ linguistic ability but also developed their communicative confidence. They moved beyond rehearsed scripts toward genuine language use, demonstrating increased fluency, creativity, and willingness to take risks in conversation. Table 1 below summarizes the improvement in student engagement and communicative competence across the six weeks of the intervention.

Table 1. Development of Student Engagement and Communicative Competence

Week	Student Engagement (%)	Speaking Competence (%)
Week 1	52	48
Week 2	61	55
Week 3	68	63
Week 4	74	70
Week 5	81	76

Week 6	86	83
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The graphical representation (Figure 1) illustrates the positive trajectory of both student engagement and speaking competence, indicating a steady upward trend throughout the intervention.

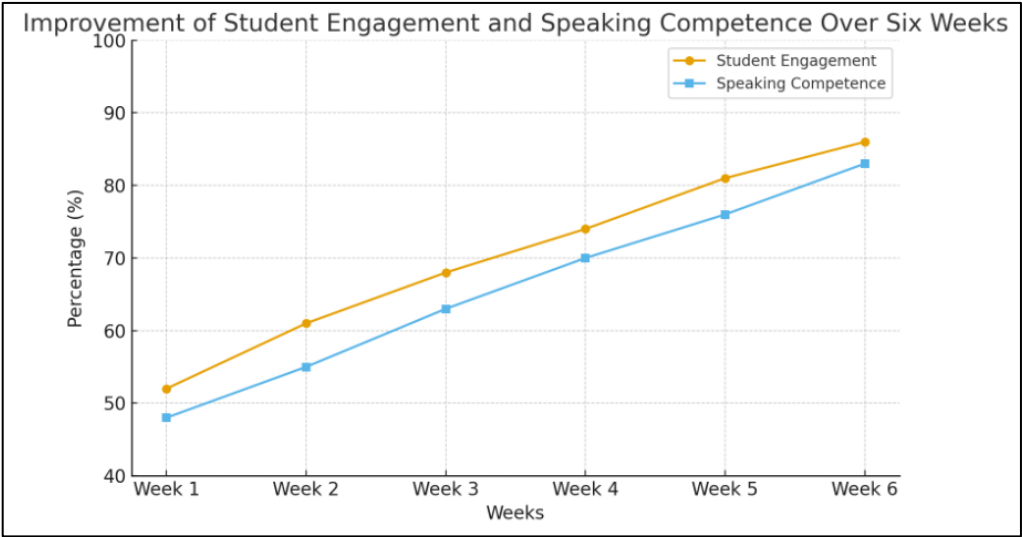


Figure 1. Improvement of Student Engagement and Speaking Competence Over Six Weeks

As shown in the figure, both indicators followed a consistent growth pattern. While the initial difference between engagement and speaking was relatively small, the gap widened slightly by Week 6, suggesting that while students quickly became more participatory, their communicative competence required more time and scaffolding to reach comparable levels.

The findings of this study demonstrate that the implementation of interactive and contextual teaching strategies significantly enhanced both student engagement and communicative competence in English classrooms at SMP negeri 2 Bandar. These results are consistent with previous studies highlighting the importance of creating meaningful, student-centered learning environments in EFL contexts (Munir & Nur, 2018) (Pratama & Sumardi, 2022). The progressive increase in active participation, from 52% in Week 1 to 86% in Week 6, indicates that contextualized tasks rooted in students’ real-life experiences can reduce language anxiety and promote greater willingness to use English.

The study revealed that student engagement improved not only in frequency but also in quality. Initially, students participated reluctantly, but by the end of the intervention, they actively collaborated, asked questions, and negotiated meaning in English. This transformation aligns with findings by Fitria et al. (2024), who reported that contextual teaching and learning (CTL) significantly increased motivation and positive perceptions toward English reading tasks in Indonesian high schools. Similarly, Fitriani & Susiati, (2025) observed that role-play and group-based tasks encouraged even shy students to engage more actively, suggesting that collaborative and interactive activities can democratize classroom participation.

The use of contextual materials, such as local cultural scenarios and everyday routines, played a crucial role in sustaining engagement (Aditama et al., 2023). This supports Rasidi & Istiningsih, (2025) conclusion that integrating familiar and culturally relevant content in digital learning contexts helped rural students perceive English as more accessible and meaningful. Thus, student engagement in this study was not merely a function of activity design but also of the cultural resonance and authenticity embedded in the materials.

The gradual improvement in communicative competence from 48% in Week 1 to 83% in Week 6 demonstrates the effectiveness of interactive instruction in fostering fluency, vocabulary development, and pragmatic strategies. At the start, students relied heavily on memorized phrases, but by Week 6, many could initiate spontaneous dialogues and employ strategies such as rephrasing or using gestures to maintain communication. These findings mirror the results of Sabar et al, (2024), who reported that communicative tasks combined with cognitive strategies improved students' fluency and confidence in speaking English at the junior high level.

Furthermore, Mariyanah (2025) found that students commonly use memorization and non-verbal cues as survival strategies in speaking. However, when supported with structured interactive tasks, they progressed toward producing more coherent sentences and sustaining conversations (Mardhiah et al., 2024). This pattern was also evident in the present study, where students transitioned from hesitant one-word answers to extended and contextually meaningful exchanges.

These findings highlight several pedagogical implications for English teaching in junior high schools, particularly in semi-rural Indonesian settings. First, contextualized materials linked to students' lived experiences enhance both comprehension and motivation, suggesting that teachers should integrate local content and real-life scenarios into lesson design. Second, interactive methods such as role-plays, pair work, and project-based tasks are powerful tools for building communicative competence, as they create low-stress environments that encourage risk-taking and creativity. Third, the consistent increase in engagement and communicative competence over six weeks implies that interactive-contextual approaches require sustained implementation to achieve meaningful outcomes, rather than one-off activities.

Moreover, the study discovered the necessity for teacher professional development in designing contextual and interactive learning experiences. As Mandasari et al, (2025) argued, technology-enhanced and interactive learning models can bridge gaps in rural contexts, but teachers need training to effectively adapt these methods. Therefore, English teacher training programs in Indonesia should emphasize pedagogical strategies that combine contextualization, interaction, and scaffolding to optimize student outcomes (Fadillah et al., 2024).

This research contributes to the growing body of literature on contextual and interactive English teaching in Southeast Asian EFL contexts. While prior studies have mostly examined high school or university settings, this study provides empirical evidence from a junior high school, where students are at a critical stage of developing communicative competence. However, the study has limitations in terms of scope and generalizability, as it was conducted with a single class over six weeks. Future research should involve longitudinal studies across multiple schools and incorporate mixed methods to capture both qualitative insights and quantitative gains in language proficiency.

Conclusion & Recommendation

This study concludes that the integration of interactive and contextual strategies in junior high school English classrooms significantly enhanced students' engagement and communicative competence, as reflected in their increased participation, motivation, and ability to use English in meaningful exchanges. By embedding local

cultural content and designing collaborative tasks, teachers successfully created an authentic and low-anxiety learning environment that supported language acquisition. It is therefore recommended that English teachers adopt sustained contextual-interactive approaches in their practice, while stakeholders and policymakers provide continuous professional development opportunities to strengthen teachers' pedagogical capacity. Future studies should expand to broader contexts and employ longitudinal or mixed-method designs to further validate the effectiveness and scalability of this approach.

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Conflict of Interest

There is no potential conflict of interest reported.

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