

Improving Communicative Competence through Montessori-Cambridge: A Case Study in Non-Formal Education

¹Ananda Suci Nurohmah, ²Yayu Heryatun

¹²Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin Banten, Indonesia

¹anandasucinurohmah@gmail.com, ²yayuheryatun@uinbanten.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This study, titled Challenges and Teaching Strategies in Implementing Montessori-Cambridge to Improve Students' Communicative Competence at FL Haus Cilegon, explores the pedagogical dynamics within a non-formal educational institution in Indonesia. Using a descriptive qualitative methodology, the research investigates the challenges faced by educators and the strategies employed to enhance students' communicative competence. The findings reveal that one of the primary challenges is the diversity of student learning styles, which demands adaptive and personalized teaching approaches. Through interviews, documentation, and observations, the study identifies three dominant strategies used by teachers: Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Interactive Strategies, and Indirect Strategies. Furthermore, the implementation of the Montessori-Cambridge approach at FL Haus Cilegon is not fully integrated; instead, both frameworks are applied in a complementary manner, aligned with digital trends and the evolving characteristics of learners in the modern era. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of hybrid pedagogical models in non-formal education settings and offers insights for educators navigating similar contexts.

Keywords: *Communicative competence; Montessori-Cambridge; Non-formal education.*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid pace of globalization and the demands of the modern workforce underscore the critical need for strong communication skills in the 21st century (Ky et al., 2021). In the field of language education, proficiency has decisively shifted from a narrow focus on linguistic systems to prioritizing language as a pragmatic communication tool (Hirshorn & Harris, 2022). This paradigm shift established communicative competence—the ability to use language effectively and appropriately in diverse contexts (Irawan, 2017)—as the central and most comprehensive goal of second or foreign language teaching (Sylla & Newman, 2009). For English language learning (ELL), this means moving beyond the mere mastery of grammar and vocabulary towards empowering learners to be flexible and adaptive speakers in real-world situations (Mufidah, 2017). However, a common practical challenge observed in educational settings, particularly at institutions like FL Haus Cilegon, is the difficulty students face in spontaneously expressing themselves in English, often compounded by limited vocabulary and a noted lack of engagement or boredom during classroom instruction (Facchin, 2020). These challenges highlight the significant influence of teaching methodologies and classroom management on students' overall communicative development (Knüpfer

et al., 2020), creating a pressing demand for more effective and enjoyable instructional strategies.

Previous scholarly endeavors have explored various aspects of curriculum and pedagogy relevant to this issue. Research has documented the application of global curricula, such as the Cambridge curriculum, often focusing on its implementation in primary schools and its relationship to specific institutional and student needs (Muzaedah et al., 2023). Similarly, the Montessori approach has been extensively analyzed for its effectiveness in promoting social development (Montessori, 2019) and specialized learning, such as improving mathematical skills in children with autism (Mustadi & Junaidi, 2024), and for its unique educational environment and collaboration methods (Hien, 2024). This body of work confirms the relevance of both approaches in addressing specific educational outcomes (Rathunde, 2001).

However, a significant research gap persists regarding the effective integration of these two distinct pedagogical frameworks. Studies on communicative competence predominantly focus on the outcome (*has*) rather than the learning process or the practical challenges associated with implementing specific teaching strategies. Furthermore, existing literature on the Cambridge approach often concentrates on academic assessment and performance, neglecting the crucial dimension of student interpersonal interactions and soft skill development (Mustadi & Junaidi, 2024). Crucially, research investigating the combined application of the Montessori and Cambridge approaches is exceptionally rare, particularly within the non-formal educational context and in a local Indonesian setting. The scarcity of studies detailing the practical strategies and challenges of this specific pedagogical integration necessitates further investigation.

Consequently, this qualitative study aims to fill this gap by focusing on the integration of the Montessori-Cambridge approach in a non-formal setting, specifically at FL Haus Cilegon. The aim is twofold: to identify the challenges faced by teachers during the implementation of the integrated Montessori-Cambridge approach, and to analyze the specific teaching strategies utilized to enhance students' communicative competence. The contribution of this research is substantial, offering unique, qualitative insights into the practice of combining two globally recognized approaches within a local context. By providing a real-world picture of how these sophisticated global frameworks can be successfully adapted, this study offers a valuable reference for both formal and non-formal educational institutions seeking to design more effective, interactive, and holistic learning strategies that prioritize the development of students' essential communication and soft skills.

METHODS

Subjects of Research

This study employs a qualitative research design to provide a rich, in-depth, and descriptive understanding of the phenomena under investigation. The qualitative approach is ideally suited for exploring complex social interactions and pedagogical practices, specifically the challenges and teaching strategies involved in implementing the Montessori-Cambridge approach and its subsequent effect on students' communicative competence. This methodology allows for deep engagement with the context, ensuring data validity through prolonged collection processes until saturation is achieved (Sugiyono, 2019), thereby increasing the trustworthiness and confidence level of the findings. The method's strength lies in its ability to uncover patterns in social interaction through the researcher's direct involvement, in-depth interviews, and careful observation, making it the most appropriate choice for this inquiry.

The research was conducted at Flame Lingua Haus Cilegon, a non-formal educational institution, between June and September 2025. The research subjects were key personnel directly involved in the instructional process. The primary informants included two English teachers and one manager of FL Haus Cilegon, selected based on their direct experience in implementing the integrated Montessori-Cambridge approach. The instructional settings used for observation were the Jumpstar and Discover classes. The Jumpstar level typically serves elementary school students, while the Discover class comprises junior high to senior high school students. These classes were chosen strategically because they collectively represent a broad range of English proficiency, spanning levels A1 to B2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) standard embedded in the curriculum. This selection provided diverse contexts for observing the nuances of teaching communicative skills across different age groups and proficiency levels.

Instruments

The primary research instruments were the researcher as the key instrument, supported by observation guidelines, semi-structured interview protocols, and documentation checklists. (1) Observation Guidelines: Structured checklists were utilized to systematically record the teaching strategies employed by the educators, the classroom management techniques, and the subsequent patterns of student communicative interaction during the implementation of the Montessori-Cambridge methods. (2) Semi-Structured Interview Protocols: These protocols were developed to guide in-depth interviews with the teachers and the manager. The questions focused on personal perceptions, detailed teaching strategies, and the specific challenges encountered in integrating the two pedagogical approaches to

enhance student communicative competence. (3) Documentation Checklists: These were used to systematically gather existing data, including teaching materials, lesson plans, curriculum documents, and student assessment records, which served as objective evidence to triangulate with the data obtained from interviews and observations.

Data Collection

Data were collected from the field using a robust triangulation approach involving observation, interviews, and documentation, ensuring comprehensive data acquisition and enhanced credibility. The collected qualitative data were systematically analyzed using the Miles and Huberman model, which operates through an interactive and continuous process (Bogdan cited in Sugiyono, 2020). The analysis proceeded through three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the research findings derived from the analysis of triangulated data, specifically through in-depth interviews, non-participant observations, and relevant documentation gathered between May and June 2025. The informants were purposively selected, comprising two English teachers and the branch manager of FL Haus Cilegon Palm Hills, chosen for their direct and comprehensive knowledge regarding the implementation of the integrated Montessori-Cambridge approach to enhance students' communicative competence. The results are systematically discussed based on the formulated research problem statements.

Challenges in Implementing the Integrated Montessori-Cambridge Approach

The primary findings reveal that teachers face several distinct challenges when implementing the integrated Montessori-Cambridge framework aimed at improving students' communicative skills. Fundamentally, the Montessori philosophy, which promotes student independence and free exploration—often through tangible, sensory-based materials—presents certain pedagogical hurdles. As one informant, MH, explained, the approach initially involves developing sensorial skills and practical life engagement, which serves as a foundation for basic vocabulary acquisition. For instance, utilizing sensory play allows the teacher to introduce objects and foster critical thinking, cognitive development, and problem-solving skills through guided exploration, connecting fun activities with language learning.

However, the core challenge lies in adapting this hands-on, exploratory approach to the diverse learning characteristics and developmental stages of the students. A key obstacle identified by teacher RNA is the necessity of meticulously adjusting teaching strategies to individual student learning styles. For example,

some students, being non-visual learners, struggle with prolonged focus on video-based instruction, while others exhibit a lack of confidence or shyness in speaking English, particularly during the adaptation phase of learning. This variability in student character demands significant emotional labor from the teachers to understand and accommodate each learner effectively while simultaneously integrating two distinct approaches.

Furthermore, contextual challenges related to the learning environment were reported, particularly concerning the extent of practical exploration required by the Montessori method. While the approach emphasizes free exploration and hands-on engagement, which is essential for developing the critical thinking necessary for strong communicative skills, teachers sometimes encounter student reluctance. As MH noted, younger students, especially in the toddler and primary classes, may be unfamiliar with or fearful of engaging with certain sensory materials like sand or dirt, primarily due to concerns about cleanliness. Although developing the confidence and independence to engage physically with the environment is a core Montessori goal, managing this hesitation remains a practical teaching challenge. While the need for sensory materials diminishes for older students (Jumpstar ages and up) who have already mastered basic self-help skills, managing student character diversity and creating a conducive, encouraging environment for speaking remains a continuous effort in the non-formal setting. These findings underscore that the heterogeneous student character and the practicalities of environmental exploration are the dominant challenges faced by educators in achieving communicative competence through the integrated approach.

Teaching Strategies in Implementing Montessori-Cambridge Approaches to Improve Students' Communicative Skills

To investigate effective pedagogical methods, the study utilized a triangulation of interviews, observations, and documentation, focusing on strategies employed at FL Haus Cilegon to enhance communicative competence within the integrated Montessori-Cambridge framework. The findings indicate that effective teaching strategies are crucial for fostering interactive learning and must be meticulously adapted to the students' character to ensure skill development, particularly in speaking, which serves as the primary observable outcome of English learning proficiency.

One highly effective strategy, frequently utilized by RNA, is the incorporation of video media through a methodology often referred to as a "lesson game." This strategy involves students watching short, curated video footage or film clips, typically sourced from ESL lesson websites. The core objective is not mere passive viewing, but active comprehension, as students are subsequently tasked with retelling or summarizing the video content. RNA emphasizes that this process

necessitates the development of critical thinking, which directly aligns with the broader objectives of the Cambridge approach. Furthermore, RNA noted that the videos selected often demonstrate real-life activities—such as pouring water, tying shoes, or conducting simple science experiments—thereby lending a Montessori context that supports sensory and motor involvement. This strategy indirectly accustoms students to expressing their opinions, views, and narrations, providing consistent practice in communicative competence.

In contrast, the teaching strategy employed by MH, particularly for younger or beginner students, leans more heavily into the Montessori principle of sensory and physical exploration, while still supporting Cambridge objectives. MH’s approach involves blending games with tangible, easily available classroom materials like pom-poms, chopsticks, and sand. The activity is designed as a word-finding game: vocabulary words, written on small slips of paper, are hidden under sensory materials (e.g., concealed beneath pom-poms or buried in sand). Students are then instructed to find a specific word verbally requested by the teacher. Critically, the children must retrieve the word using chopsticks, an action that simultaneously practices fine motor skills (a key Montessori practical life component) and develops crucial listening comprehension. This strategy is particularly effective for beginner levels because it bridges the exploration-based Montessori approach with the structure-based vocabulary mastery required for communicative competence. By linking physical action to listening and word recognition, the game effectively promotes phonemic awareness, vocabulary acquisition, and ultimately, foundational communication skills in a highly engaging manner.

Beyond these specific strategies, the observational data revealed another highly interactive and contextually rich teaching method: presentation during cooking class. In this activity, students are tasked with making a simple food or drink item using available ingredients. The communicative learning occurs as students are required to describe the preparation process in English, while the teacher actively engages them by inquiring about the ingredients used. This integrated strategy is highly effective because it provides a genuine, real-world context for language use, significantly boosting student interest and encouraging spontaneous, interactive communication beyond traditional classroom drills.

Adaptation and Implementation of the Montessori-Cambridge Approach in Non-Formal Education

The research findings clarify how the integrated Montessori-Cambridge approach is adapted and implemented within the non-formal educational context of FL Haus Cilegon to enhance learners’ communicative skills. While Montessori is fundamentally exploration-based and Cambridge is structured around academic

curriculum, the institution finds strong philosophical and pedagogical links between the two that support the development of communicative competence.

As confirmed by the manager, AH, the application at FL Haus is not a rigid, officially integrated curriculum named "Montessori-Cambridge," but rather an inspired combination driven by the need to follow contemporary digital developments while maintaining a structured curriculum. AH explained that the combination emerged from observing children's easy adaptation to digital technology for language learning, though acknowledging the dual nature (benefits and risks) of digital immersion. The primary goal of this combined approach is to achieve an integrated curriculum that offers students both fun learning (*fun learning*) and systematic English instruction adhering to a proper curriculum standard. AH proudly noted that FL Haus pioneers English courses that use the Cambridge curriculum while being inspired by Montessori principles.

The practical adaptation occurs when teachers strategically embed Montessori-inspired activities within the Cambridge-driven curriculum structure. As teacher MH detailed, developing sensorial skills through practical life activities is utilized to teach basic vocabulary. For instance, sensory play is used as a context where the teacher introduces objects and engages students in spontaneous communication (e.g., "Hey! Do you know what this is? It's a shark!"). This approach ensures that students not only acquire vocabulary but also develop critical thinking, cognitive skills, and problem-solving abilities through joyful, exploratory play—a foundational Montessori concept adapted beyond early childhood to support core language skills.

This flexible adaptation is evident in various classroom practices. Even when using structured, Cambridge-based materials, such as textbooks from Compass Publishing or visuals from Pinterest, teachers subtly integrate communicative tasks. For example, during a documentation observation, the teacher displayed images of animals, people, and items, asking students to determine the appropriate Preposition of Place. This seemingly structured task immediately prompted indirect peer discussion and collaborative problem-solving, effectively training the students' communicative skills in a contextualized manner. Thus, the implementation at FL Haus successfully functions as a responsive model where the *spirit* of Montessori's exploration and hands-on engagement is used as a pedagogical tool to make the *content* and *structure* of the Cambridge curriculum—particularly its focus on critical application and interaction—more engaging and effective for improving students' overall communicative competence in a non-formal setting.

CONCLUSION

From the results of the research, especially at the non-formal educational institution FL Haus Cilegon, the challenges often faced by Teachers at FL Haus Cilegon are the suitability of different student learning styles, thus requiring teachers to be able to prepare learning strategies that are in accordance with the character of student learning. Then, for strategies that are often used from the results of interviews, documentation, and observations are Communicative Language Teaching strategies, Interactive Strategies, and Indirect Strategies. Then the implementation of Montessori-Cambridge at FL Haus Cilegon is not actually integrated but Montessori and Cambridge are indirectly related to each other by following the digital flow and adjusting the character of children in this era.

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