

Improving Early Childhood Educators' Communication Skills for Optimal Child Growth and Development

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Abstract

- Purpose** : The causal relationship between teacher communication skills and early childhood developmental outcomes has been a central focus of empirical inquiry in early childhood education literature. While effective teacher-child communication is widely recognized as a critical driver of children's cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional growth, a comprehensive synthesis of existing evidence remains necessary to establish a solid theoretical foundation for the design of teacher training programs. This literature review aims to synthesize empirical evidence from previous research on the impact of improving early childhood teachers' communication skills on key developmental indicators in early childhood. The study's significance lies in providing an evidence-based framework to inform the development of communication-competency-focused teacher professional development initiatives.
- Methodology** : This study employed a systematic literature review approach, analyzing peer-reviewed empirical research published between 2020 and 2025. Data sources included major indexed academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar. Relevant journal articles employing both qualitative and quantitative methodologies were selected using predetermined keywords related to teacher communication skills and early childhood development. A total of 25 articles meeting the inclusion criteria were identified, critically appraised, and synthesized thematically to identify consistent patterns regarding communication training interventions, pedagogical strategies, and their associated child developmental outcomes.
- Results** : The thematic synthesis of the 25 selected research articles reveals consistent and converging findings. The literature indicates that structured training interventions including coaching, microteaching, reflective practice, and video-based professional learning significantly improve teachers' responsive and instructional communication competencies. Based on evidence from the reviewed studies, these improvements are strongly correlated with measurable child progress across multiple developmental domains, particularly vocabulary acquisition, expressive and receptive language skills, social competence, active participation in classroom interactions, and emotional regulation. Studies further suggest that the quality of teacher-child verbal interaction, characterized by open-ended questioning, contingent responsiveness, and extended discourse, serves as a key mediating factor in facilitating positive developmental outcomes.
- Conclusions** : This review establishes that there is strong, consistent scientific evidence in the literature linking improvements in early childhood teachers' communication skills to more positive child developmental outcomes across cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional domains. The findings underscore the critical need for evidence-based, explicitly communication-competency-focused approaches in teacher professional development programs. Recommendations are provided for policymakers, teacher educators, and early childhood institutions to prioritize sustained, practice-oriented communication training as a foundational component of professional development frameworks, ultimately fostering higher-quality teacher-child interactions that support children's holistic development during the critical early years.

Keywords: communication skills, early childhood teacher, early childhood, child development

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1. Introduction

The development of quality human resources begins with a strong foundation in early childhood education (ECE). Globally, evidence from neuroscience and education confirms that responsive interactions between educators and children during the golden age constitute a primary prerequisite for optimal cognitive, socio-emotional, and language development (Bank, 2018). The international commitment embedded in Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

target 4.2 positions the quality of early care and education as a key indicator of development success. In Indonesia, compliance with national ECE standards, particularly the Standards for Educators and Education Personnel (Permendikbud No. 137 of 2014), remains a complex challenge. Data from Kemendikbudristek, (2023) reveal that while the majority of ECE teachers have met academic qualification requirements, the strengthening of pedagogical competencies, especially contextual educative communication, requires particular attention. At the local level, preliminary observations at TK Islam Tunas Harapan identified both potential and challenges: an Islamic-oriented learning environment serves as an added value, yet it has not been maximally leveraged through deliberately designed pedagogical communication strategies (intentional teaching) to holistically facilitate all dimensions of child growth and development.

The body of empirical research on ECE teacher communication skills has expanded rapidly. Internationally, the meta-analysis by Manning (2019) affirms that the quality of teacher-child interaction, encompassing instructional and emotional communication, is the single strongest predictor of child developmental outcomes in ECE settings. Research in Indonesia, such as the quantitative study by Pratiwi & Suardiman, (2022), found a positive correlation between reflective communication training and improvements in teachers' questioning skills. Meanwhile, qualitative research by Fadillah, (2021) categorized teacher communication patterns in inclusive ECE settings, highlighting the importance of nonverbal communication. A more specific study by Hidayati et al., (2023) evaluated the impact of linguistic scaffolding-based training on children's vocabulary development. However, a critical review of this entire research corpus reveals two prevailing tendencies: first, the dominance of evaluative-programmatic or descriptive-generic research approaches; and second, the limited number of studies conducting in-depth and critical synthesis to construct a comprehensive theoretical framework, particularly one that synergizes modern pedagogical communication principles with Islamic communication ethics that are practiced in institutions such as TK Islam Tunas Harapan.

Based on the mapping of previous research, a substantive and contextual research gap has been identified. Substantively, no study has specifically designed and proposed a comprehensive conceptual framework model for improving ECE teacher communication skills derived from the synthesis of current literature. Most research has focused on measuring the impact of a particular intervention or capturing existing conditions, rather than on constructing a theoretical foundation capable of guiding continuous diagnosis and development. Contextually, there is a scarcity of systematic literature reviews that intentionally integrate pedagogical communication theories (such as responsive teaching and dialogic reading) with Islamic communication value frameworks (such as *qaulan layyina* (gentle speech), *qaulan ma'rufa* (kind speech), and *qaulan sadida* (truthful speech)) as a distinctive and contextually relevant approach for Islamic-based ECE institutions. The integration of these values is not merely symbolic but serves as an operational principle in every daily interaction (Harianto et al., 2025).

Addressing both gaps carries a dual urgency. From a practical-applied perspective, this study will produce a theoretical blueprint that can serve as a reference for the development of evidence-based and culture-sensitive teacher competency enhancement programs at TK Islam Tunas Harapan and similar institutions, thereby transcending ad-hoc training approaches. From a scientific-theoretical perspective, this study contributes along three dimensions: (a) consolidating dispersed empirical findings into a coherent synthesis for the field of ECE pedagogical communication; (b) enriching the body of knowledge in early childhood education by offering an integrative perspective between educational communication science and Islamic ethical values; and (c) providing a methodological exemplar in conducting systematic literature reviews that are not merely descriptive but also aim to construct an applicable conceptual framework for specific contexts.

Based on the above framework of thought, the primary objective of this study is to construct a theoretical-empirical conceptual framework for enhancing early childhood teachers' communication skills that support child growth and development, through a systematic literature review method, with TK Islam Tunas Harapan as the contextual point of

departure. This conceptual framework is designed to bridge contemporary pedagogical communication theory with local-religious values, thereby possessing high relevance both academically and practically.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study is a non-empirical research employing a systematic literature review method. The design follows the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) protocol to ensure transparency, accuracy, and replicability (Page et al., 2021). A qualitative approach was adopted to conduct an in-depth synthesis of previous research findings, enabling contextual exploration and narrative interpretation of the collected evidence (Snyder, 2019).

2.2. Research Subjects/Objects and Data Source Characteristics

The research subjects were primary academic documents that met the inclusion criteria. Data sources consisted of empirical research articles (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods) published in scientific journals. Data source characteristics were determined through the SPIDER (Sample, Phenomenon of Interest, Design, Evaluation, Research type) criteria, which are adaptive for qualitative reviews (Cooke et al., 2019): Sample (S): Early childhood education (ECE/kindergarten) teachers and/or young children (aged 3–6 years); Phenomenon of Interest (PI): Teachers' pedagogical communication skills, communication competency training/development, and their association with child growth and developmental indicators; Design (D): Empirical studies of any design; Evaluation (E): Outcomes related to the improvement of teacher skills or their impact on child development; and Research type (R): Primary research published in journals.

2.3. Sampling Technique and Sample Size

Sampling was conducted purposively through a rigorous multi-stage selection process. The initial search was performed on indexed scientific databases including Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar as a supplementary source, as well as nationally accredited journals (Sinta 1–4). The search was limited to publications from January 2020 to December 2025 to ensure the currency of findings. The keywords used were combinations of: "teacher communication" OR "pedagogical communication" AND "early childhood education" OR "preschool" AND "professional development" OR "training" AND "child development." The final sample size was not predetermined but followed the results of selection based on inclusion and exclusion criteria. The selection process was visually documented using a PRISMA flow diagram.

2.4. Variables and Operational Definitions

Although this is not a correlational study, the focus of this review centers on two main constructs. First, ECE Teacher Communication Skills, operationally defined as a set of intentional verbal and nonverbal pedagogical competencies used by teachers to facilitate learning and positive interactions. These include, but are not limited to: responsive talking, active listening, open-ended questioning, developmentally appropriate language use, and supportive nonverbal communication. Second, Early Childhood Growth and Development, defined as measurable progress in child developmental domains, which in the context of this review focuses on outcomes influenced by teacher interaction, namely receptive-expressive language development, socio-emotional competence (emotional regulation, social skills), and engagement in the learning process.

2.5. Instruments and Data Collection Techniques

The primary instrument of this study was a Data Extraction Sheet designed by the researchers. This sheet guided the structured data collection from each selected article, covering: article identity (author, year, title, journal), research methodology, participant characteristics, intervention details (if applicable), main findings, and conclusions. Data

collection was conducted through systematic searching in the designated databases, followed by title-abstract screening, full-text retrieval, and data extraction using the aforementioned instrument.

2.6. Research Procedures

The research procedures followed three main stages. First, Planning: developing the review protocol encompassing the research questions, PICO/SPIDER criteria, search strategy, and analysis plan. Second, Execution, which consisted of: (a) Identification, running keyword searches across all databases; (b) Screening, filtering results based on inclusion/exclusion criteria through independent examination of titles, abstracts, and full texts by two researchers to avoid bias (inter-rater reliability), with disagreements resolved through discussion or consultation with a third researcher; and (c) Extraction, completing the Data Extraction Sheet for each eligible article. Third, Reporting: synthesizing the data and reporting results in accordance with PRISMA guidelines.

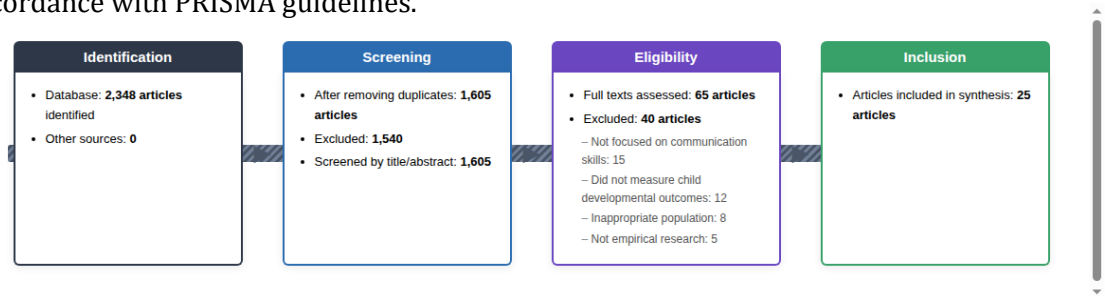


Figure 1. PRISMA Diagram

2.7. Data Analysis Technique

The extracted data were analyzed using Thematic Analysis following the model of Braun & Clarke, (2022) within a qualitative narrative synthesis framework. The stages comprised: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) initial code generation, (3) theme searching, (4) theme reviewing, (5) theme defining and naming, and (6) report production. The analysis was conducted inductively to identify patterns, themes, and insights emerging from the body of literature, rather than to test hypotheses. The synthesis was focused on answering the research question concerning the conceptual framework for enhancing teacher communication skills.

3. Results

3.1. Overview of Selected Studies and Descriptive Characteristics

Of the 25 empirical research articles that met the inclusion criteria, the main characteristics of the studies are narratively summarized in Table 1 below. The majority of studies (n=16, 64%) were published in Scopus-indexed journals (Q1–Q3), while the remainder (n=9, 36%) were published in Sinta 1 and 2 journals. The dominance of quantitative quasi-experimental (n=11) and qualitative phenomenological (n=7) research designs indicates a strong trend of empirical approaches in this topic. The publication year range was concentrated in the 2020–2024 period (n=18, 72%), reflecting the currency of academic discourse on ECE teacher communication skills.

Table 1. Characteristics and Main Findings of 25 Selected Articles in the Systematic Literature Review

Study Aspect	Sub-Category	Number of Articles	Percentage (%)	Findings/Main Summary
Study Profile				
Research Design	Quantitative Quasi-Experimental	11	44.0	Primary focus on measuring the effectiveness of training interventions.

	Qualitative Phenomenological	7	28.0	In-depth exploration of teacher experiences and perceptions.
	Mixed-Methods	4	16.0	Combining impact analysis and contextual understanding.
	Quantitative Correlational	3	12.0	Analyzing relationships between variables without intervention.
Geographic Locus	Indonesia	9	36.0	Highest number of studies; focused on local context but not yet specific to religious values.
	United States & Global North	10	40.0	Dominated by controlled intervention studies and evidence-based measurement.
	Australia, Europe, East Asia	6	24.0	Focused on interaction quality and classroom climate.
<i>Thematic synthesis</i>				
Effective Intervention Models	Video-Based/Direct Coaching	8	32.0	Most effective; improved teacher responsive skills (effect size $d=0.68-1.10$).
	Community of Practice (CoP)	5	20.0	Effective for reflection, social support, and contextual problem-solving.
Critical Communication Dimensions	Responsive & Contingent Communication	17	68.0	Primary foundation; strongly correlated with child engagement and language development ($\beta=0.45-0.62$).
	Instructional Language Input Quality	15	60.0	Open-ended questions and complex language predict expressive language ability.
	Nonverbal Emotional Support	12	48.0	Foundation of positive classroom climate and child socio-emotional development.
Impact on Children	Language & Vocabulary Development	19	76.0	Most consistent impact; vocabulary test effect size reached $d=0.78$.
	Socio-Emotional Skills	14	56.0	Significant improvement in cooperation and self-regulation ($p<0.05$).
	Engagement	11	44.0	Teacher responsive communication as primary predictor

					(explaining 34% of variance).
GAP	Integration of Local/Religious Values	0	0		None of the articles integrated a religious/spiritual value framework (such as <i>qaulan layyina</i>) in the analysis. This represents a major gap for contexts such as Islamic kindergartens.

3.2. Thematic Synthesis: Competency Development Models and Strategies

The synthesis of 13 articles that specifically examined training interventions (Hadley et al., 2021; Sembiring & Wahyuni, 2023) identified two effective evidence-based approach models. The main findings of the literature synthesis organized by theme are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Main Findings of Literature Synthesis by Theme

Synthesis Theme	Key Sub-Findings	Number of Articles	Key Supporting Data	Key References
Effective Intervention Models	Video-Based & In-Classroom Coaching	8	Effect size (Cohen's d) 0.68–1.10; $p < 0.01$	(Slot & Burchinal, 2020)
	Community of Practice (CoP)	5	Improvement in metacognitive awareness and contextual problem-solving among teachers	Chen & de Groot (2022)
Communication Dimensions with Impact	Responsive & Contingent Communication	17	Correlation with child engagement (β : 0.45–0.62)	Jamison et al. (2020)
	Instructional Language Input Quality	15	Predicts expressive language development and reasoning	Nurjanah & Amelia (2024)
	Nonverbal Emotional Support	12	Correlation with positive classroom climate and socio-emotional competence	Viñas & Garcia (2022)
Impact on Child Development	Language & Vocabulary Development	19	Effect size (Cohen's d) 0.45 and 0.78 on vocabulary tests	Hadley et al. (2021)
	Socio-Emotional Skills	14	Significant differences ($p < 0.05$) on cooperation and self-control scales (SSIS)	Viñas & Garcia (2022)
	Child Engagement	11	Responsive communication predicts 34% of	Jamison et al. (2020)

			engagement variance ($\beta=0.58, p<0.01$)
Contextual Gap	No articles integrated local/religious values in the analytical framework	0 of 25 (0%)	Further research needed to integrate

First, the sustained evidence-based coaching approach. A total of 8 articles, such as Slot & Burchinal, (2020) reported the effectiveness of video-based coaching and in-classroom coaching models. Quantitative data demonstrated significant improvement ($p<0.01$) in observation scores of teacher responsive communication skills, with effect sizes (Cohen's d) ranging from 0.68 to 1.10 at post-test. Qualitative analysis in accompanying studies indicated an increase in teachers' metacognitive awareness of their own interaction patterns. Second, the community-based learning approach (community of practice). A total of 5 qualitative articles (Chen & de Groot, 2022) highlighted the effectiveness of sustained collaborative forums for teachers. The primary mechanisms reported were the creation of a safe space for practice reflection, sharing strategies for addressing contextual challenges, and strengthening professional social support among fellow educators.

3.3. Communication Dimensions Impacting Child Growth and Development

The analysis of 21 articles measuring the relationship or impact of teacher communication on children crystallized three critical communication dimensions. First, Responsive and Contingent Communication (Contingent Responsiveness). A total of 17 articles (including Jamison et al., 2020) consistently found a positive correlation between teachers' ability to respond appropriately and continuously to children's verbal/nonverbal cues and increased child engagement in learning (β ranging from 0.45–0.62 in regression analysis) and vocabulary development (average effect size $d=0.52$). Second, Instructional Language Input Quality and Variation (Instructional Language Input). A total of 15 articles (such as the study by Nurjanah & Amelia, 2024) reported that the frequency and complexity of teacher language use, particularly the use of decontextualized talk (language beyond the here-and-now context) and open-ended questions, significantly predicted early childhood expressive language ability and early reasoning skills. Third, Emotional Support through Nonverbal Communication (Nonverbal Emotional Support). A total of 12 articles (including Viñas & Garcia, 2022) highlighted the vital role of facial expressions, physical proximity, and warm and supportive tone of voice. This dimension was strongly correlated with a positive classroom climate and the development of children's socio-emotional competence, including self-regulation and prosocial skills.

3.4. Identification of Contextual Gaps in the Literature

A critical synthesis of the entire article corpus revealed one prominent contextual gap. Of the 25 articles, none explicitly and comprehensively integrated an analysis of communication values or ethics derived from religious perspectives or specific local wisdom (such as the value of **qaulan layyina** in Islam) as part of the theoretical framework or operationalization of research variables. Studies located in Indonesia ($n=9$) also predominantly discussed general pedagogical aspects without exploring the specific value frameworks that may shape communication practices in religion-based settings.

4. Discussion

In general, the results of this synthesis align with the broad consensus in the literature on the importance of high-quality interactions in ECE. The finding that responsive communication (contingent responsiveness) constitutes the most critical dimension (Hadley et al., 2021; Jamison et al., 2020) reinforces the serve and return theory from Harvard's Center on the Developing Child. Similarly, the validity of coaching-based training models (Slot & Burchinal,

2020) and community of practice (Chen & de Groot, 2022) as effective professional development strategies was reaffirmed in the context of this review. This consistency indicates that evidence-based interactive pedagogical principles are universal in their foundation, regardless of cultural variation. However, this review revealed differences in the depth of contextual analysis. Most previous studies, particularly from the Global North, operated within general pedagogical frameworks (such as CLASS). The synthesis results instead demonstrate that although the fundamental principles are universal, the implementation and emphasis of communication strategies are strongly influenced by context. Studies in Indonesia, for example, Andriani et al. (2025), although still limited, have begun to touch upon local nuances in interaction, yet have not positioned them as a central analytical framework. Herein lies the gap between universal findings and contextual needs.

The primary theoretical implication of this review is the need for the development of an integrative and contextual pedagogical communication framework. The finding that three dimensions (responsiveness, language quality, and nonverbal support) operate simultaneously supports a holistic, rather than partial, approach to viewing teacher communication competence. Furthermore, the identification of an absolute gap (0%) in the integration of religious/local values across the 25 selected articles constitutes a significant theoretical signal.

This gives rise to a new theoretical proposition: an effective pedagogical communication framework for specific settings (such as Islamic kindergartens) must constitute a synergistic integration between evidence-based pedagogical principles and the value systems and communication ethics that are alive within that context (local/religious communicative ethos). For instance, the concept of *qaulan layyina* (gentle speech) in Islam does not merely parallel the general principle of positive language, but can provide a deeper philosophical foundation, intrinsic motivation, and cultural parameters for teachers in practicing responsive and supportive communication. The neglect of this value dimension in existing theoretical frameworks has the potential to diminish the relevance and sustainability of training programs across diverse communities.

The practical implications are transformative, shifting away from a one-size-fits-all approach. For educational institutions (such as TK Islam Tunas Harapan), these findings provide a foundation for designing teacher development programs that not only adopt general training modules but also codify and teach exemplary communication practices aligned with institutional values. For example, developing coaching modules that align open-ended questioning techniques with Islamic ethics of inquiry, or developing classroom observations that also assess the alignment of nonverbal communication with local civility values. For policy and training institutions, accreditation and teacher training need to incorporate the contextualization of pedagogical communication as a competency. National standards can be enriched with derivative guidelines that encourage ECE institutions to define and develop "quality communication" in accordance with the socio-cultural and religious characteristics of the communities they serve. For teachers, these findings empower them not merely to be passive recipients of external training, but to become reflective practitioners who actively align new pedagogical knowledge with their personal and community values, thereby creating authentic and effective communication practices.

This review has several limitations. First, as a literature study, the findings depend on the quality and focus of published articles. The dominance of quasi-experimental research designs may insufficiently capture the complexity of communication dynamics in naturalistic settings. Second, despite extensive search efforts, there may still be relevant studies not indexed in the databases used or published in local languages. Third, the contextual gap identified is based on absence in the literature; primary empirical research is required to actually construct and test the proposed integrative model.

Therefore, future research is strongly needed in the following areas. First, Design-Based Research in specific settings (such as Islamic kindergartens) to design, implement, and evaluate teacher communication skill enhancement models integrated with contextual values. Second, Communication Ethnography Research to map in depth the patterns and meanings of teacher-child communication across various socio-cultural contexts in Indonesia, as a basis for

developing authentic frameworks. Third, Longitudinal Studies to examine the long-term impact of contextualized communication models on child development, while simultaneously measuring the sustainability of changes in teacher behavior.

This synthesis does not merely confirm that "teacher communication matters." Beyond that, this review directs attention to "how communication that matters is meaningfully enacted within specific value domains." The enhancement of ECE teacher communication skills for child growth and development, therefore, must be viewed as an endeavor that is not only technical-pedagogical but also cultural and ethical. This effort requires collaboration among educational scholars, practitioners, and value holders within communities to collectively write the next chapter in a more inclusive and relevant pedagogical communication literature.

5. Conclusion

This systematic review concludes that the enhancement of ECE teacher communication skills constitutes a critical pillar for supporting child growth and development, with the highest effectiveness achieved through sustained interventions such as coaching and communities of practice. The main findings not only confirm the positive impact of responsive communication, language quality, and nonverbal support dimensions on children's language, socio-emotional development, and engagement, but more importantly, reveal a fundamental gap in the literature: the absence of contextual value integration (such as Islamic communication ethics) into teacher competency development frameworks. Accordingly, this study successfully addresses its objective by proposing the need for a paradigm shift from generic training approaches toward the development of an integrative and contextual pedagogical communication framework. The contributions of this study are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, this review offers a proposition regarding the synergistic integration between evidence-based pedagogical principles and local value systems as the foundation for a new model. Practically, the primary recommendation is for institutions such as TK Islam Tunas Harapan to develop training and coaching modules that explicitly align effective communication techniques (e.g., open-ended questioning) with the institutional values upheld (such as **qaulan layyina**), thereby creating authentic and sustainable practices. For future research, two main agendas are proposed. First, design-based research is needed to design and test contextualized teacher communication skill enhancement models in specific settings. Second, communication ethnography studies and longitudinal research are needed to map in depth communication practices within distinctive Indonesian contexts and to measure the long-term impact of contextual models on child development.

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