

RESEARCH ARTICLE

From Local to Global: A Qualitative Study on the Impact of IELIP 2024 English Immersion Program on English Language Learning and Application

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Abstract

This study investigates the effectiveness of the International English Language Immersion Programme (IELIP) 2024, a four-day intensive English camp held at the University of Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) from 14–17 August 2024, in enhancing students' English and intercultural awareness. Participants were 107 students: 17 Thai students from Fatoni University and Yala Rajabhat University in Thailand's Deep South, and 90 Malaysian students from UMK. Using a qualitative design, pre- and post-camp open-ended interviews explored participants' concerns, hopes, and reflections, while observations recorded their engagement during presentations and informal conversations, their willingness to communicate in English, and their ability to navigate cultural differences. The findings revealed a marked reduction in speaking anxiety and increased use of newly learned vocabulary during hands-on activities such as "Globe-Trotting" and the "Treasure Hunt." Participants reported growing confidence and improved communication skills, alongside greater intercultural awareness in interactions with peers from a different national background. The study contributes qualitative evidence that even a brief, cross-border ASEAN immersion experience can support both linguistic and intercultural development. It recommends that future programmes incorporate native speakers for authentic exposure and expand real-world activities, directly addressing the hesitancy and pronunciation concerns participants voiced before the camp.

Keywords: IELIP 2024, English language skills, immersion programs, real-world activities

Introduction

Globalization has reshaped how English is used: only about one in four English speakers is a native speaker, and most use the language in settings where native speakers are absent (Textinspector, 2023). This underscores English's role as a global lingua franca for communication across cultures. Where English is not the dominant language, learners need opportunities to practise it in real-life, communicative contexts — precisely what immersion programs provide (Lewis, 2020). Yet English functions differently across ASEAN: it is a second language in Malaysia but a foreign language in Thailand (Taladngoen, 2019; Nair-Venugopal, 2021), so immersion can help learners from each setting deepen both language and cultural understanding.

For Thai students, Malaysian programs — such as those at IIUM and UUM — offer exposure to a diverse culture alongside language practice (Vaivanjit & Nire, 2022; Lee & Tan, 2023), building not only language skills but also the intercultural competence needed in a globalized world.

One such program is the International English Language Immersion Programme (IELIP) 2024, held at the University of Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) from 14–17 August 2024 under the theme "English Going Global." Organised by UMK staff and English teachers, it aimed to improve English proficiency, foster cross-cultural understanding, and prepare students for global communication. Seventeen Thai students from Fatoni University and Yala Rajabhat University joined 90 Malaysian students for activities including ice-breaking, campus and library tasks, "Globe-Trotting and Build a Nation," a beach Treasure Hunt, and storytelling, culminating in student presentations such as advertisements, short films, and performances at the closing ceremony.

Although prior research has established the benefits of immersion learning, comparatively little has examined short-term, cross-border immersion within ASEAN — particularly programmes bringing together Thai students from the Deep South and Malaysian students at UMK, a university rich in traditional culture yet seeking global connection. Existing studies also tend to foreground linguistic gains while giving less attention to the intercultural outcomes that emerge when learners from different national backgrounds interact, and qualitative accounts of brief, four-day camps remain scarce. The present study addresses this gap by examining both the language-related and intercultural effects of IELIP 2024, extending the qualitative evidence base on short-term immersion in an under-studied ASEAN context.

Research Objective

This study aims to assess the effectiveness of the IELIP 2024 program by comparing participants' English language skills and cultural competence before and after attending the camp. To guide the inquiry, the study addresses two research questions: (RQ1) How does the IELIP 2024 program impact the English-speaking confidence and communicative skills of Thai and Malaysian participants? (RQ2) To what extent does the program facilitate intercultural competence and the ability to navigate cultural differences among participants?

Literature Review

As English increasingly serves as a medium of intercultural communication among non-native speakers, many learners are taught by non-native English teachers (NNESTs) rather than native English teachers (NESTs), and they often value a teacher's experience and skill over native-speaker status (Textinspector, 2023). Deng, Zhang, and Mohamed (2023) distinguish NESTs (first-language English speakers, typically from countries such as the UK, the USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand) from NNESTs, who learn English as a second or foreign language; although the "NNEST" label has been criticised for invoking ideas about race and language, it still signals the diverse backgrounds of English teachers. This diversity is directly relevant to the present study: in programmes such as IELIP 2024, most communication occurs among non-native speakers from different cultures, so intercultural communication (rather than approximation to a native-speaker norm) becomes the central goal that an immersion environment is designed to develop.

1. Challenges and Opportunities in Language Learning in Thailand and Malaysia

English teaching differs across ASEAN. In Malaysia, English is a second language taught from an early age across subjects; it serves both as an internal medium of communication and as a bridge to global networks, reflecting the country's colonial history, with bilingual proficiency in Malay and English as the goal. In Thailand, by contrast, English is a foreign language. Since the National Education Act of 1999 promoted student-centred teaching, the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach has been encouraged, yet practice still lags: teachers often rely on grammar-translation, and assessment continues to prioritise grammar and reading over communicative proficiency (Taladnogo, 2019).

Reflecting these tensions, Fonghoi, Tayjasanant, and Nomnian (2019) found that eight Thai female English teachers in Narathiwat faced challenges with workload and the limited integration of local and global issues, but valued active, workshop-based professional

development and believed that incorporating local and global topics would enhance students' proficiency, cultural awareness, and attitudes toward cultural differences (Fonghoi, Tayjasanant, & Nomnian, 2019). These systems therefore offer different opportunities: Malaysia's bilingual policy gives students more everyday exposure to English, though ensuring equitable access across regions and social groups remains a challenge.

These systemic gaps are more pronounced in Thailand, where curriculum, teacher training, and grammar-and-reading assessments limit communicative outcomes. Teng and Sinwongsuwat (2015) argued that performance-based assessments (interviews, speeches, and videos) would better capture, and motivate, communicative ability, while in Malaysia, strengthening the bilingual approach and equalising educational quality across regions could further raise proficiency (Putra, 2023).

Immersion programs, in which learners are surrounded by English in a natural environment, are widely regarded as effective for developing language skills (particularly listening and speaking) and for creating motivating, community-oriented settings such as the informal "English zone" described by Supriyono, Saputra, and Dewi (2020), though evidence that they consistently outperform other methods is not conclusive (Blazer, 2017).

2. Immersion Program

Immersion shifts learners from memorisation and grammar-translation toward using English in real situations through active, learning-by-doing practice; Pratiwi, Atmowardoyo, and Salija (2020) note that, unlike older methods, immersion helps learners both speak and understand better. Supriyono, Saputra, and Dewi (2020) explain that placing learners in a target-language environment strengthens listening and speaking while developing cultural understanding, making learners more confident in cross-cultural interaction (much like the real-world communication CLT promotes). Surveying Structured English Immersion (SEI) and Bilingual Education (BE), Blazer (2017) found no clear superiority of either model: programme quality matters more than method. Well-designed programmes (with trained teachers, clear entry and exit criteria, and proficiency-based grouping) can reach high proficiency and academic outcomes comparable to all-English instruction, as in Canada's Early French Immersion.

In their own study, Supriyono, Saputra, and Dewi (2020) combined curriculum design, proficiency management, and language management in a modified immersion model, drawing on site observations and interviews with eight participants (two language managers, six

learners). The model fostered informal English interaction and yielded a learning community, greater self-efficacy and language awareness, increased exposure, and stronger motivation to use English.

Pratiwi, Atmowardoyo, and Salija (2020) conducted a three-month needs analysis at Kampung Inggris Pare (KIP), Kediri, Indonesia, using participant observation and semi-structured interviews with 24 learners from six institutions. Participants reported sharper awareness of their learning needs and challenges, and increased engagement driven by self-awareness and intrinsic motivation.

Christophersen (2022) reviewed how dual language immersion (DLI) programmes support English learners, concluding that DLI students perform as well as or better than peers in language and other subjects, and that more time learning in the second language is associated with higher test scores and a stronger sense of identity. Porter and Castillo (2023) compared immersion and traditional classroom learning among 60 non-native speakers, measuring TOEFL scores before and after. Immersion learners gained significantly more, though the authors recommend blending immersion with structured instruction in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation for a more holistic experience.

In sum, immersion consistently outperforms traditional classroom methods in developing language skills and cultural understanding, as shown by Blazer (2017) and Christophersen (2022), while Porter and Castillo (2023) report measurably higher TOEFL gains; Supriyono, Saputra, and Dewi (2020) add that blending immersion with structured instruction best balances proficiency with academic success. Collectively, however, these studies leave two gaps that the present study addresses. First, this evidence concerns mainly long-term or programme-length immersion (for example, the three-month study by Pratiwi, Atmowardoyo, and Salija, 2020, or Canada's multi-year French immersion), whereas limited research has examined short-term immersion programmes in ASEAN contexts. Second, few qualitative studies have explored both language and intercultural outcomes within a single brief immersion camp. The IELIP 2024 case therefore offers an opportunity to extend this literature into a short-term, cross-border ASEAN setting.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to evaluate how effectively the IELIP 2024 program helped students improve their English and learn about different cultures. Data were collected through open-ended interviews and observations. These methods are based

on studies that show how immersion programs help students get better at language skills and understand other cultures (Supriyono, Saputra, & Dewi, 2020; Blazer, 2017; Pratiwi, Atmowardoyo, & Salija, 2020; Christophersen, 2022; Porter & Castillo, 2023).

Participants and Sampling

The IELIP 2024 program involved 107 participants: 17 Thai students from Fatoni University (FTU) and Yala Rajabhat University (YRU), and 90 Malaysian students from UMK. The interview data reported here were drawn from the 17 Thai participants, 10 from YRU (YRU1–YRU10) and 7 from FTU (FTU1–FTU7), selected through purposive sampling as the Thai delegation attending the camp. They were undergraduates majoring in English (Liberal Arts) and English (Education), aged 19–21, of both genders, who predominantly self-reported A2–B1 (CEFR) proficiency. Observational data were collected across all 107 participants.

The camp ran from 14–17 August 2024. Pre-camp interviews were conducted on the morning of the first day, before activities began, and post-camp interviews shortly after participants returned to their universities, so the reported progress and reflections refer to the period bounded by these two points.

Observations evaluated participants' engagement in group discussions, presentations, and informal conversations, their use of English in real-life contexts, and their ability to adapt to cultural differences. The researcher acted as a non-participant observer, recording open field notes against three criteria (willingness to speak, use of new vocabulary, and peer support) throughout each day of the four-day camp.

Before the camp, participants answered two open-ended questions: (1) What worries do you have about the English camp? and (2) What do you hope to get from the English camp? Responses surfaced concerns such as anxiety about speaking English, difficulty understanding instructions, and nervousness about using only English. After the camp, they answered: (1) How do you feel about your English skills after the camp? and (2) What parts of the camp helped you most in learning English?

Interviews were conducted individually, each lasting approximately 30–45 minutes, and were audio-recorded and transcribed. They were conducted in English, but to help participants at A2–B1 express their concerns and hopes accurately, code-switching into Thai or Malay was permitted and complex prompts were clarified in their first language when needed.

Data Analysis

The open-ended responses were analysed thematically to identify common patterns, comparing participants' pre-camp worries and hopes with their post-camp reflections to assess how far the program met its goals; findings were also compared with prior immersion research. To strengthen trustworthiness, the two data sources (interviews and observations) were triangulated so that patterns in one could be corroborated by the other. Inter-rater reliability was also established: the researchers independently coded a selection of interview transcripts and observation notes, then cross-checked, discussed discrepancies, and reconciled the final thematic framework.

Ethical Considerations

All participants took part voluntarily and gave written informed consent prior to data collection; as all were aged 19 or older, parental consent did not apply. To protect confidentiality, participants were identified by codes (e.g. YRU1, FTU1) rather than real names, as in the results. Formal ethical approval was not required, since data collection involved standard educational activities posing no risk to participants, but all procedures followed standard academic ethical guidelines.

Results

The analysis groups the interview and observation evidence into four themes that capture what the data mean for the research questions: (1) growth in speaking confidence and participation, (2) development of communicative competence, (3) increased intercultural awareness, and (4) peer collaboration and support. Representative quotations are integrated into each theme; the full set of pre- and post-camp responses appears in Table 1.

Theme 1: Growth in Speaking Confidence and Participation. Many students were initially shy, especially in formal activities like "Read and Share," but grew more comfortable and eager to join in as the camp progressed, particularly during the "Treasure Hunt," "Globe-Trotting" challenge, and storytelling. Across the pre-camp interviews, the majority of the 17 Thai participants expressed initial hesitancy about speaking English, indicating the shift was not confined to a few individuals. Analytically, sustained exposure within a low-stakes, English-only environment reduced affective barriers such as speaking anxiety, facilitating genuine communicative participation rather than mere activity. This is reflected in one YRU student's shift from "I'm nervous about talking in English all the time" to "I can speak without feeling shy now" (YRU1).

Theme 2: Development of Communicative Competence. Over time, students (especially those from YRU) moved from mixing English with gestures to initiating talk even in casual conversations. Interpreted analytically, this progression signals a shift from rehearsed language use toward genuine communicative competence, in which participants prioritised conveying meaning over avoiding error. The "Read and Share" activity's role in expanding vocabulary is concrete: participants adopted expressions such as "from my perspective," "on the other hand," and "to sum up." This matches their self-reports, with one YRU student moving from "I don't know enough English words" to "I learned a lot of new words" (YRU4), and an FTU student noting being able to "say words more clearly now" (FTU2).

Theme 3: Increased Intercultural Awareness. Students from different backgrounds initially experienced small misunderstandings over gestures and speaking styles, but ice-breaking games and team activities quickly built comfort and cross-cultural friendships. One concrete instance illustrates this adaptation: Thai students initially misread direct eye contact as aggression, but a group ice-breaker helped them recognise it as a sign of active listening. Analytically, such episodes show participants did not merely tolerate difference but actively developed intercultural awareness, learning to interpret and adjust to unfamiliar communicative norms (an outcome directly relevant to RQ2). As one participant noted, ice-breaking "helped me make friends" (YRU1), pointing to relationship-building as the mechanism through which cultural distance narrowed.

Theme 4: Peer Collaboration and Support. A cross-cutting pattern was the support participants gave one another: more-experienced FTU students scaffolded YRU peers' pronunciation and grammar, while group activities such as the "Treasure Hunt" and discussions made collaboration a condition for completing tasks. Analytically, this peer scaffolding appears to have lowered the affective cost of speaking and accelerated the confidence gains in Theme 1, suggesting the camp's social structure (not only its English-only policy) drove the observed outcomes. This is reflected in accounts that "the group activities made me confident" (FTU1) and that group discussions helped one student "keep a conversation better now" (FTU6).

Overall, the four themes show students growing more confident in English and collaborating across cultural divides as language and cultural barriers eased.

Interview

The table below presents the responses of FTU and YRU students to interview

questions regarding grammar, vocabulary, public speaking, confidence, and the activities they participated in before and after

Student ID	Pre-Camp: Worries	Pre-Camp: Expectations	Post-Camp: Perceived Improvement	Post-Camp: Most Beneficial Aspects
YRU1	"I'm nervous about talking in English all the time."	"I hope to feel more confident."	"I can speak without feeling shy now."	"Ice-breaking helped me make friends."
YRU2	"I don't understand English very well sometimes."	"I want to get better at listening."	"I can understand people more easily."	"The Treasure Hunt made me listen carefully."
YRU3	"I'm scared of making grammar mistakes."	"I want to learn how to speak correctly."	"I worry less about being perfect."	"Storytelling helped me use English naturally."
YRU4	"I don't know enough English words."	"I want to learn more vocabulary."	"I learned a lot of new words."	"The 'Read and Share' helped build vocabulary."
YRU5	"I'm afraid of speaking in front of people."	"I want to practice public speaking."	"I'm less scared to speak up."	"Performing at the closing ceremony helped."
YRU6	"I'm worried I can't keep up with others."	"I want to improve my English overall."	"I feel better about my English."	"The activities kept us using English all day."
YRU7	"I don't feel confident speaking English."	"I want to feel less shy."	"I'm more comfortable now."	"Role-playing helped me talk more."

YRU8

"I only speak English in class usually."

"I want to use English every day."

"I liked speaking English all day."

"Campus adventure made me use English outside."

YRU9

"I'm worried about not understanding jokes and expressions."

"I want to understand casual English."

"I can understand jokes better now."

"Storytelling helped with informal language."

YRU10

"I'm not good at grammar."

"I want to speak more accurately."

"I'm more confident with grammar."

"The 'Read and Share' taught me grammar."

FTU1

"I feel shy talking in a group."

"I want to get better at teamwork."

"I can talk in groups now."

"The group activities made me confident."

FTU2

"I'm afraid my pronunciation is wrong."

"I want to improve pronunciation."

"I can say words more clearly now."

"Storytelling helped with pronunciation."

FTU3

"I have trouble understanding English audio."

"I want to understand movies and songs."

"I understand audio better."

"The 'Globe-Trotting' challenge improved listening."

FTU4

"I don't know if my English is correct."

"I want to use proper English."

"I feel more accurate in speaking."

"The 'Read and Share' helped correct mistakes."

FTU5

"I'm nervous speaking English with strangers."

"I want to speak with new people."

"I feel okay talking to others now."

"The Treasure Hunt required talking to new people."

FTU6	"I struggle with keeping a conversation going."	"I want to improve my conversation skills."	"I can keep a conversation better now."	"Group discussions helped with this."
FTU7	"I'm slow to think of responses in English."	"I want to respond faster."	"I think faster in English now."	"The activities made me think on my feet."

Table 1 Pre-Camp and Post-Camp Interviews (Student Quotations)

Read across the seventeen cases, Table 1 reveals several consistent patterns. First, the most frequent pre-camp worry concerned confidence and fear of mistakes (particularly grammar and pronunciation) while post-camp responses most often described feeling less shy, less afraid of being "perfect," and more willing to speak. Second, vocabulary growth recurred as a salient gain, frequently attributed to the "Read and Share" activity. Third, several participants linked their improvement to interactive, task-based activities (the "Treasure Hunt," "Globe-Trotting," storytelling, and the closing performance) rather than formal instruction. Together, these patterns indicate that the camp's principal effect was affective and participatory (reducing anxiety and increasing willingness to communicate) which in turn enabled the vocabulary and confidence gains participants reported.

Discussion

The data collected from pre- and post-camp interviews, along with observations, indicates that the IELIP 2024 program had a big impact on students' language skills and understanding of different cultures. By analyzing the interview results and related studies, we can identify key learning outcomes, constructive feedback from participants, challenges encountered, and how this program compares to other similar programs.

Key Learning Outcomes for Participants: The main goal of the camp was to improve English communication and cultural understanding. Based on participants' post-camp reflections and observational data, these goals were mostly achieved. Participants showed improvement in listening and speaking skills, and many felt more confident and fluent in English. This is similar to what Supriyono, Saputra, and Dewi (2020) found in their research, which showed that immersion programs help learners practice real-world communication.

Blazer (2017) also pointed out that these programs work best when they focus on high-quality, interactive learning experiences.

Feedback from Participants: Participants mostly gave positive feedback about the camp's structure and fun activities like the Treasure Hunt and "Read and Share" session. They said the hands-on activities helped them practice English in real situations. Observations showed that students who were shy at first started to feel more comfortable using English during group talks and casual conversations. This matches what Porter and Castillo (2023) found, which is that immersive experiences help improve language skills by using English in different situations.

Challenges and Their Solutions: One challenge at the start of the camp was that some students, especially from YRU, were nervous about speaking English confidently. There were also some misunderstandings because of different cultural backgrounds. To help with this, the camp included team-building and ice-breaking activities. These activities helped students get to know each other better and created a supportive atmosphere where they could comfortably share and practice English. This approach supports what Christophersen (2022) said about the importance of a friendly and respectful environment for learning. Additionally, Pratiwi, Atmowardoyo, and Salija (2020) stressed the need to consider students' different needs, which was part of the camp design through activities that matched the students' various levels.

The Impact of IELIP 2024 on Global English Proficiency: The IELIP 2024 program helped improve global English skills by creating a structured environment where students used English all the time. The program immersed students in an English-only space, which helped them learn language skills that can be used both locally and internationally. Activities like presentations and storytelling helped students practice English in real-life situations. This method follows the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach, which focuses on using language in practical ways. According to Supriyono, Saputra, and Dewi (2020), using English in real-life situations helps students improve their language skills and understand different cultures. When compared to other programs, IELIP 2024 is similar to the Kampung Inggris Pare (KIP) immersion program, studied by Pratiwi, Atmowardoyo, and Salija (2020), where learning English through cultural activities and informal settings helped students feel more confident and motivated. Porter and Castillo (2023) also showed that immersion programs, like IELIP 2024, help students learn English faster than traditional classroom

lessons, especially when they use English in real-world situations. However, IELIP 2024 could be even better if native speakers were included in the program. This would make it more like dual language immersion programs (DLI) discussed by Christophersen (2022), where having native speakers helps students improve their English even more.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The IELIP 2024 program shows that even a short immersion experience can improve English communication, confidence, and intercultural understanding, echoing Supriyono, Saputra, and Dewi (2020), who found that immersion builds both practical language skills and appreciation of cultural difference. Beyond confirming these general benefits, this study contributes specifically to the qualitative literature on short-term English immersion: it provides evidence that even a brief, four-day cross-border ASEAN experience can support both linguistic development and intercultural development among Thai and Malaysian participants. In doing so, it extends an evidence base concentrated on longer, single-country programmes and underscores the pedagogical value of designing immersion around low-stakes, task-based interaction and peer support rather than formal instruction alone.

Several practical recommendations follow. First, future programmes may consider including native or highly proficient English-speaking facilitators in informal sessions (for example, as conversation partners during meals or evening activities) so participants encounter authentic pronunciation and expressions — warranted because participants here identified pronunciation and fear of error as their main pre-camp concerns, and Christophersen (2022) found that richer target-language exposure strengthens outcomes. Second, programmes may embed more structured real-world tasks (role-played service encounters, problem-solving challenges, or short community interactions) since the task-based activities in this camp were the ones participants credited with their gains, consistent with Pratiwi, Atmowardoyo, and Salija (2020), whose needs analysis showed that meaningful, learner-relevant tasks sustain motivation. Third, organisers may consider tiering activities by proficiency so learners across the range can contribute comfortably.

Limitations of the Study

These findings should be read in light of several limitations. First, the interview sample was small (17 Thai participants) from a single four-day programme, so the patterns are not statistically generalisable. Second, the study relied on self-reported perceptions of progress rather than standardised measures of language gain, which were not independently tested.

Third, because data were collected during and immediately around the camp, the study cannot show whether the gains were retained over the longer term. Finally, the analysis centred on the Thai participants; a fuller account would also incorporate the Malaysian participants' experiences. These limitations temper the strength of the claims while pointing to clear next steps for research.

Future Research Directions

Future research could combine qualitative interviews with pre- and post-programme standardised measures to corroborate self-reported gains. Longitudinal follow-up several months later would help establish whether short-term immersion produces lasting change. Comparative studies across multiple ASEAN programmes, and studies including all national groups involved, would clarify which design features most reliably support linguistic and intercultural outcomes, while larger samples and mixed-methods designs would strengthen transferability. In conclusion, the value of a programme such as IELIP 2024 lies in how it moves learners from the local to the global: by giving Thai and Malaysian students a low-stakes space to use English across cultural lines.

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Conflict of Interest:

The authors declare no conflict of interest.