

The Role of Sundanese Language Education in Developing Students' Politeness: A Study at Cikeusi II State Elementary School, Sumedang Regency

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Abstract

Character education through regional language instruction has gained increasing attention as an effective approach to moral development. This study examined the role of Sundanese language education in developing students' politeness at Cikeusi II State Elementary School, Sumedang Regency, focusing on how linguistic instruction cultivates character values through cultural expressions and *undak-usuk basa* principles. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed involving one Sundanese language teacher and seventeen fifth-grade students aged 10-11 years who had participated in Sundanese language instruction for at least one academic year. Data were collected through structured classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with teachers and students, and documentation of learning materials. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns related to politeness behaviors, teaching strategies, and implementation challenges, with triangulation ensuring data credibility. Sundanese language education demonstrated significant effectiveness in developing student politeness, achieving an 84.1% overall success rate across observed behaviors. Students showed highest proficiency in expressing gratitude (94.1%) and demonstrating respectful gestures (94.1%), while more complex hierarchical politeness behaviors such as avoiding interruptions with elders (76.5%) and careful word choice (70.6%) required continued reinforcement. Pedagogical approaches integrating role modeling, cultural storytelling, and contextual exercises proved effective, though limited instructional time, insufficient contextual media, and inconsistent family support posed implementation challenges. The findings support social learning theory and character education frameworks, demonstrating that regional language education serves as an effective vehicle for transmitting cultural values and developing moral behavior. However, inconsistencies between school and non-school environments highlight the need for comprehensive home-school-community collaboration to achieve sustainable character development outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Education serves as a fundamental cornerstone in cultivating values, character, and personality development among students. According to Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System, educational objectives extend beyond intellectual capacity development to encompass the formation of individuals who demonstrate faith, piety, creativity, independence, responsibility, and noble character. Among the essential values emphasized in character education, politeness emerges as particularly significant because it reflects respect for others and serves as the foundation for harmonious social interactions. Research has consistently demonstrated that politeness contributes substantially to strengthening social bonds, building trust, and fostering supportive learning environments (Indrayana et al., 2023).

The theoretical foundation of character education draws from established global frameworks. Kohlberg's (1981) stages of moral development suggest that education should facilitate progression through developmental stages by presenting ethical dilemmas and fostering critical thinking. Similarly,

Bandura's (1977) social learning theory emphasizes the importance of observation, imitation, and modeling in behavior acquisition, highlighting the critical role of educators and environmental factors in shaping student character. From a sociolinguistic perspective, language functions not merely as a communication tool but as a primary medium for socializing individuals into cultural norms and values (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984). The concept of language socialization demonstrates how children acquire culturally specific behavioral patterns through everyday linguistic interactions.

Contemporary research in character education has increasingly recognized the interconnection between language use and politeness development. Studies examining various regional languages have revealed significant potential for character formation through linguistic instruction. Chotimah, Untari, and Budiman (2019) demonstrated that the implementation of Javanese unggah-ungguh (speech levels) effectively develops politeness values among students. Similarly, Harlina and Wardarita (2020) established that language learning plays a crucial role in elementary school character formation. Hasanah, Kusumastuti, and Koesmadi (2023) further documented how Javanese krama inggil (high-level honorific language) successfully cultivates respectful behavior in young children. These findings align with broader theoretical perspectives that emphasize the role of linguistic socialization in moral development.

Research on Sundanese language education has yielded particularly promising results for character development. Madjid, Abdulkarim, Iqbal, and FPIPS (2016) identified the significant role of Sundanese cultural values in parental guidance for children's social character formation. Nugraha (2017) demonstrated that proper Sundanese language etiquette implementation contributes to national character building. Recent studies have continued to explore this relationship, with Maghfiroh and Abduh (2024) examining politeness character development through Javanese speech level application, while Natanti, Pratiwi, and Fardani (2023) investigated politeness character values embedded in Javanese language habits among elementary school children in family environments.

Cross-cultural research supports the universal significance of language-based politeness systems in character education. Different cultures demonstrate unique communicative patterns that reflect their sociocultural conventions and shape thinking and speaking patterns (Ngai & Janusch, 2018). The complexity of politeness systems involves social, psychological, linguistic, and paralinguistic aspects that require careful attention in educational settings. Research on social-emotional and character development (SECD) has emphasized the importance of cultivating specific virtues such as gratitude, generosity, and future-mindedness, which align closely with politeness development goals (Elias, 2009; Hatchimonji et al., 2017).

However, significant gaps persist between theoretical understanding of character education and its practical implementation in schools. Many educational programs continue to prioritize cognitive achievement while behavioral aspects such as politeness receive insufficient attention or inconsistent application (Nuriadin, Pratama, & Chandra, 2025). This indicates that integrating character values into classroom practice requires more systematic and culturally grounded approaches. Recent research has highlighted additional challenges, including Pertiwi, Wijayanti, and Akbar (2025) identifying strategic approaches for instilling politeness character values through Javanese krama language habits, while Safitri and Wiranti (2025) analyzing the habituation of refined Javanese language use in developing student politeness character.

Within this context, regional languages possess unique potential for transmitting cultural values and strengthening students' moral development. Sundanese, as one of Indonesia's major local languages, reflects politeness norms through its undak-usuk basa system, which regulates appropriate word choice based on age, social status, and relationships. This linguistic system embeds respect and courtesy directly into everyday communication (Sudaryat et al., 2023; Zein, Wagiaty, & Darmayanti, 2025). This system parallels honorific systems in other languages, such as Japanese keigo and Korean jondaetmal, which serve as central components in character education and social harmony within their respective cultures (Brown, 2011).

Nevertheless, Sundanese language instruction in schools encounters several challenges, including limited instructional time, insufficient contextual learning materials, and diminishing use of Sundanese in family and community environments (Nurjanah et al., 2022). These challenges often weaken the impact of Sundanese language learning on students' actual behavior. Previous studies have demonstrated the importance of strengthening character education through local languages. Krisnawati (2018) showed that Sundanese storytelling effectively nurtures politeness and empathy in children. Adela and Al-Akmam (2024) found that schools play strategic roles in preserving Sundanese culture while simultaneously instilling courtesy among students.

Despite these advances, few studies have examined this phenomenon within the specific context of elementary schools located in Sundanese-speaking areas. As an educational institution embedded in the cultural heartland of Sumedang, Cikeusi II State Elementary School presents a valuable case for exploring how global theoretical frameworks and documented challenges manifest in real-world educational settings, thereby addressing crucial contextual gaps in existing literature.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the role of Sundanese language education in shaping students' polite character at Cikeusi II State Elementary School. Specifically, the research examines: (1) how Sundanese instruction emphasizes polite behavior development, (2) the forms of politeness exhibited by students in daily interactions, and (3) the challenges faced by educators in fostering such behavior. By addressing these questions, this research is expected to provide theoretical contributions and practical implications for developing culturally responsive curricula that strengthen students' academic competence while nurturing their identity, politeness, and cultural values.

METHODS

This research employed a descriptive qualitative approach to examine the role of Sundanese language education in developing students' politeness at Cikeusi II State Elementary School, Sumedang Regency. The qualitative methodology was selected to capture the complex meanings, processes, and experiences of both teachers and students within their natural educational context, allowing for in-depth exploration of how linguistic instruction influences character formation without manipulating variables or imposing external controls on the learning environment.

The study population comprised all teachers and students at Cikeusi II State Elementary School, with the sample determined through purposive sampling based on relevance to the research objectives and accessibility criteria. Specifically, the research involved one certified Sundanese language teacher with a minimum of five years' teaching experience and seventeen fifth-grade students aged 10-11 years who had participated in Sundanese language instruction for at least one academic year. These participants were selected because they represented active engagement in the language learning process and could provide authentic insights into the relationship between linguistic education and behavioral development. All student participants came from Sundanese-speaking households within the local community, ensuring cultural authenticity and relevance to the study's focus.

Research instruments included structured observation sheets designed to capture specific politeness behaviors during classroom interactions and informal school activities, semi-structured interview guides for both teachers and students to explore perceptions and experiences related to character development through language learning, and documentation protocols for collecting relevant materials such as lesson plans, student work samples, and school policies. To ensure instrument validity and reliability, a comprehensive two-stage validation process was implemented. Expert judgment was conducted with two specialists in education and character development who reviewed the observation criteria and interview questions for content validity and cultural appropriateness. Subsequently, a pilot study involving five students outside the main sample was conducted to test the clarity, relevance, and practical applicability of the instruments, with feedback incorporated into the final versions.

Data collection proceeded through systematic phases beginning with formal permission acquisition and instrument preparation, followed by classroom observations conducted over multiple sessions to capture authentic interactions and behavioral patterns. In-depth interviews were conducted with the teacher to understand pedagogical strategies and challenges, while student interviews explored their perceptions of politeness learning and behavioral changes. Documentary evidence was gathered to provide contextual background and triangulate findings from observations and interviews. Throughout the data collection process, member checking was employed to verify the accuracy of recorded information and interpretations with participants.

Data analysis utilized thematic analysis involving iterative cycles of data reduction, systematic organization, and conclusion drawing. Open coding was initially applied to identify emerging patterns related to politeness behaviors, teaching strategies, and implementation challenges. These codes were subsequently organized into broader themes that addressed the research questions. The analytical process incorporated triangulation of multiple data sources to enhance credibility and reliability, while maintaining reflexivity regarding the researcher's potential influence on data interpretation and ensuring that emerging themes accurately represented participants' experiences and perspectives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings of this study reveal the multifaceted role of Sundanese language education in developing students' politeness at Cikeusi II State Elementary School. The results are organized around three key areas: the pedagogical approaches employed in Sundanese language instruction for character development, the manifestation of politeness behaviors among students, and the challenges encountered by educators in implementing character-based language education.

Sundanese Language Instruction for Character Development

Classroom observations revealed that Sundanese language instruction at Cikeusi II State Elementary School extended beyond linguistic competency to encompass systematic character development through cultural values integration. The teacher employed diverse pedagogical strategies, including role modeling, interactive discussions, and contextual exercises that emphasized the *undak-usuk basa* system. During observed lessons, students were consistently exposed to polite expressions such as "punten" (excuse me), "hatur nuhun" (thank you), and "mangga" (please/go ahead), which were reinforced through repetitive practice and real-life application scenarios.

Teacher interviews revealed a deliberate pedagogical approach that connected language learning with character formation. The instructor emphasized that *"teaching Sundanese is not just about vocabulary and grammar, but about instilling respect and courtesy that are inherent in our culture."* This approach aligns with the integration of cultural storytelling, speech competitions, and traditional arts performances that provided contextual reinforcement for politeness values. The teacher utilized authentic situations to demonstrate appropriate language use based on social hierarchy, age differences, and formal versus informal contexts, thereby embedding respect and courtesy directly into communicative practices.

Student Politeness Behaviors and Manifestations

To systematically assess the impact of Sundanese language instruction on student behavior, structured observations were conducted across multiple contexts within the school environment. The table 1 presents the comprehensive findings regarding students' demonstration of politeness behaviors.

The data presented in Table 1 demonstrates that the majority of students consistently exhibited politeness behaviors across various contexts. The highest achievement rates were observed in expressing gratitude (94.1%) and showing respectful gestures (94.1%), indicating successful internalization of basic courtesy practices. Conversational politeness behaviors, including greeting

others appropriately (88.2%) and using polite request forms (88.2%), also showed strong implementation rates.

Table 1. Observed Politeness Behaviors Among Fifth-Grade Students (n=17)

Politeness Behavior	Students Demonstrating	Students Not Demonstrating	Percentage Achieving
Greeting others with polite language	15	2	88.2%
Showing respectful gestures	16	1	94.1%
Not interrupting elders during conversation	13	4	76.5%
Speaking kindly and politely	13	4	76.5%
Respecting others' opinions and arguments	13	4	76.5%
Monitoring language to avoid offense	12	5	70.6%
Expressing gratitude after receiving help	16	1	94.1%
Using "please" when requesting assistance	15	2	88.2%
Asking permission before borrowing items	15	2	88.2%
Saying "excuse me" when passing others	15	2	88.2%
Overall Average	14.3	2.7	84.1%

However, more complex politeness behaviors revealed areas requiring continued development. Approximately 23.5% of students still interrupted elders during conversations, while 29.4% occasionally failed to monitor their language to prevent causing offense to others. These findings suggest that while fundamental politeness expressions have been successfully acquired, the nuanced application of appropriate communication in hierarchical social contexts requires additional reinforcement.

Student interviews provided qualitative insights into their understanding and application of politeness concepts. One student explained, *"When I use 'punten' and 'hatur nuhun,' I feel more respectful to my teachers and friends. It makes me feel good inside."* Another student noted, *"Sometimes I forget to use polite words at home, but at school, I always remember because our teacher reminds us."* These responses indicate emerging awareness of politeness as both linguistic practice and moral behavior, though consistency across different contexts remains variable.

Implementation Challenges

Teacher interviews and classroom observations identified several significant challenges in implementing character-based Sundanese language education. The primary constraint involved limited instructional time allocation, with Sundanese language receiving only two hours per week compared to other core subjects. This time limitation restricted opportunities for intensive practice and reinforcement of politeness behaviors through extended interactive activities.

The absence of contextual learning media posed another substantial challenge. The teacher reported, *"We lack adequate materials that connect Sundanese language with daily politeness situations. Most available resources focus on vocabulary rather than character applications."* This limitation affected the ability to provide diverse, engaging scenarios that could strengthen the connection between linguistic competence and behavioral manifestation.

Furthermore, inconsistent reinforcement from family and community environments emerged as a critical challenge. Observational data revealed that students demonstrated higher politeness consistency within the school environment compared to informal interactions during breaks or when observed in community settings. The teacher noted, *"Many students understand the concepts well in class, but their application becomes inconsistent when family members don't model or reinforce the same values at home."*

Discussion

This study demonstrates that Sundanese language education serves as an effective vehicle for character development, specifically in fostering politeness among elementary school students. The findings reveal the intricate relationship between linguistic instruction and moral development,

aligning with several theoretical frameworks that emphasize the interconnection between language learning and character formation.

The observed success in developing fundamental politeness behaviors, with 84.1% overall achievement rate, supports Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, which emphasizes the importance of observation, imitation, and modeling in behavior acquisition. The teacher's deliberate role modeling of polite expressions and respectful interactions provided students with concrete examples to emulate, demonstrating the practical application of social learning principles in character education. This finding resonates with recent research by Chotimah, Untari, and Budiman (2019), who documented similar success in developing politeness values through Javanese speech level implementation, suggesting that regional language education possesses universal potential for character formation across different cultural contexts.

The variability in politeness achievement across different behaviors reflects the cultural specificity of communicative patterns that Ngai and Janusch (2018) describe as possessing both universal elements and particular characteristics. Each culture develops unique speech patterns through sociolinguistic conventions that shape thinking and communication styles. The high achievement rates in specific behaviors such as expressing gratitude (94.1%) and showing respectful gestures (94.1%) demonstrate successful language socialization as described by Ochs and Schieffelin (1984), where students acquired culturally specific behavioral patterns through everyday linguistic interactions. This confirms that language functions as a primary medium for transmitting social norms and values, paralleling findings by Hasanah, Kusumastuti, and Koesmadi (2023), who observed similar success in developing respectful behavior through Javanese *krama inggil* instruction.

The complexity of politeness development observed in this study aligns with theoretical frameworks that recognize the multifaceted nature of communicative competence. Leech's (1983) principles of cooperation and politeness provide a lens for understanding how students learn to navigate social interactions through strategic language use. The students' varying success rates across different politeness behaviors reflect the challenge of mastering what Leech describes as the balance between providing appropriate information while maintaining social harmony and relationship stability. The successful acquisition of expressions like "hatur nuhun" and "punten" demonstrates students' developing understanding of face-saving strategies that preserve both their own and their interlocutors' self-esteem.

However, the inconsistencies observed in more complex politeness behaviors, particularly interrupting elders (23.5% still demonstrating this behavior) and careful word choice (29.4% occasionally failing), can be interpreted through Kohlberg's (1981) stages of moral development. These findings suggest that many students remain at pre-conventional stages of moral reasoning, where politeness is primarily motivated by avoiding reprimand or gaining teacher approval rather than being internalized as autonomous moral principles. This interpretation aligns with Lickona's (1991) character education framework, indicating that students have progressed in moral knowing and are developing moral feeling, but have not yet achieved consistent moral action across all contexts.

The hierarchical aspects of politeness behavior observed in this study reflect what Goffman (1955) and Jia (1997) describe as the relational, communal, hierarchical, and moral dimensions of face-saving behavior. The students' difficulty in consistently avoiding interruptions with elders and their variable success in monitoring language to prevent offense suggest challenges in internalizing the hierarchical nature of respect that acknowledges age, status, and social position differences. This finding aligns with Leech's (1983) conceptualization of relative politeness, where appropriate behavior depends heavily on contextual factors and social relationships between interactants.

The pedagogical approach employed at Cikeusi II State Elementary School reflects the educational philosophy of Ki Hajar Dewantara through the implementation of *ing ngarsa sung tuladha* (leading by example), where teachers served as role models for appropriate language use and respectful behavior. This cultural educational framework, combined with systematic exposure to *undak-usuk basa* principles, created an environment conducive to character development through

linguistic instruction. The integration of storytelling, speech competitions, and cultural arts performances provided multiple reinforcement channels that strengthened the connection between language learning and character formation, supporting the approach advocated by Krisnawati, (2018) in their research on Sundanese storytelling for character development.

The study's findings on gratitude expression align with research on character virtue development. Chaplin et al. (2019) and Gillham et al. (2011) have demonstrated that gratitude functions as a transcendence virtue that predicts life satisfaction and subjective well-being. The high achievement rate (94.1%) in expressing gratitude through "hatur nuhun" suggests that Sundanese language education effectively cultivates this fundamental character virtue. This success reflects what Emmons and McCullough (2003) describe as an orientation toward appreciating positive aspects of life, which correlates with enhanced mental health and positive social relationships.

The contextual challenges identified in this study illuminate the complexity of character education implementation. The limited instructional time and insufficient contextual media echo concerns raised by Nurjanah et al. (2022) and Nuriadin, Pratama, and Chandra (2025) regarding gaps between character education theory and practice. More critically, the finding that family and community reinforcement significantly affects student consistency reflects what Adrefiza and Jones (2013) identify as the importance of considering socio-pragmatic subtleties and the broader social context in language-based character development. The inconsistency between school and non-school environments suggests that politeness education, like the apology response studies described by Saleem et al. (2021), requires attention to multiple interactional contexts and the responses of various social actors.

The study's results support the social-emotional and character development (SECD) framework proposed by Elias (2009) and Hatchimonji et al. (2017), which emphasizes the integration of moral and performance character with social-emotional skills. The high achievement rates in gratitude expression and respectful behavior demonstrate that Sundanese language education effectively promotes character virtues that align with positive youth development goals. However, the variability in more complex politeness behaviors suggests that achieving what Hatchimonji et al. (2017) describe as positive purpose—the superordinate virtue that guides prosocial application of character skills—requires sustained development across multiple contexts.

From an international perspective, the challenges observed in undak-usuk basa mastery mirror research on honorific language education in other cultural contexts. Studies on Japanese keigo and Korean jondaetmal instruction reveal similar gaps between students' ability to recall honorific forms and their appropriate application in complex social situations. This parallel suggests that the difficulties encountered at Cikeusi II State Elementary School represent broader challenges in language-based character education rather than context-specific limitations, supporting Ngai and Janusch's (2018) observation that cultural conventions shape both thinking and speaking patterns in complex ways.

The variability in student performance across different politeness behaviors confirms that character development through language education requires sustained attention to multiple dimensions of social competence. This finding aligns with Chejnová's (2021) observation that politeness responses involve various situational factors, personality interfaces, and individual conditions that influence behavioral realization. The students' success in basic courtesy expressions but challenges in hierarchical politeness behaviors suggests that developing comprehensive social competence extends beyond linguistic proficiency to encompass cultural understanding and contextual behavioral application.

The research contributes to the growing body of literature that recognizes regional languages as valuable resources for character education, supporting findings by Harlina and Wardarita (2020) on the role of language learning in elementary school character formation. However, the study also reveals the complexity of translating linguistic competence into consistent behavioral application, highlighting the need for comprehensive approaches that integrate school, family, and community support systems. This complexity reflects what Fredrickson's (1998) broaden-and-build theory

suggests about positive emotions expanding cognitive and social resources—that character development requires sustained positive reinforcement across multiple environments to achieve the ethical decision-making and meaningful social contributions that Lerner et al. (2013) identify as ultimate character education goals.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Sundanese language education plays a significant role in developing politeness among elementary school students, with 84.1% overall achievement rate in observed politeness behaviors. The research reveals that systematic integration of *undak-usuk basa* principles and cultural expressions such as "punten," "hatur nuhun," and "mangga" effectively cultivates character values through linguistic instruction. Students demonstrated highest proficiency in fundamental courtesy behaviors, particularly expressing gratitude (94.1%) and showing respectful gestures (94.1%), while more complex hierarchical politeness behaviors required continued reinforcement.

The study contributes to character education scholarship by providing empirical evidence that regional language education serves as an effective vehicle for moral development. It extends theoretical understanding of language socialization by demonstrating how cultural linguistic systems embedded within educational curricula can successfully transmit social norms and values. The research also validates the applicability of social learning theory and character education frameworks within Indonesian cultural contexts, particularly through the integration of traditional educational philosophy with contemporary pedagogical approaches.

The findings have important implications for educational policy and practice. Schools implementing regional language curricula should adopt systematic approaches that connect linguistic competence with character development through role modeling, contextual activities, and cultural reinforcement. However, the study's identification of inconsistencies between school and non-school environments underscores the necessity for comprehensive home-school-community collaboration to achieve sustainable character development outcomes.

Several limitations constrain the generalizability of these findings. The study's focus on a single school with a small sample size limits broader applicability, while the qualitative descriptive design prevents causal inference regarding the effectiveness of Sundanese language education compared to alternative approaches. Additionally, the research did not examine long-term sustainability of politeness behaviors or the specific influence of family and community factors.

Future research should employ longitudinal designs to assess the persistence of character development outcomes over time. Mixed-methods approaches incorporating larger, more diverse samples would strengthen the evidence base for regional language-based character education. Comparative studies examining different regional languages and cultural contexts would enhance understanding of universal versus culturally specific mechanisms in language-based character development. Furthermore, investigations into optimal integration strategies for school-family-community collaboration would provide practical guidance for sustaining character education outcomes across multiple environments.

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