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Developing Language and Cultural Understanding Through Real-Life Contexts Among Elementary School Students

Dewa Made Agustawan[a*], Reni Anggraeni[a], I Gede Gunadi Putra[a], Jericho Alwiratu-raman Sinurat[a]

[a]Institut Seni Indonesia Bali, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

Language and culture is an essential component of elementary education, as both contribute significantly to students' communication skills, social awareness, and appreciation of cultural diversity. However, language and cultural learning that primarily relies on classroom-based materials may limit students' ability to connect academic knowledge with their everyday experiences. This study aims to examine the use of real-life contexts as an approach to enhancing elementary students' understanding of language and culture. Context-based learning can be implemented through meaningful activities, including everyday conversations, traditional games, local stories, traditional foods, family activities, and interactions with the surrounding environment. Through these experiences, students are encouraged not only to acquire vocabulary and language structures but also to recognize cultural values, social practices, norms, and identities embedded in their daily lives. Furthermore, learning through authentic contexts provides opportunities for students to develop communication skills, critical thinking, collaboration, and respect for cultural differences. The integration of language and culture into real-life learning experiences foster a more relevant, interactive, and meaningful learning environment for elementary students. This approach is expected to support students in using language appropriately in various social contexts while simultaneously developing their cultural awareness and appreciation of the diversity within their communities.

KEYWORDS

Language Learning, Cultural Understanding, Elementary Students, Real-Life Context

Introduction

Language education in elementary schools plays a fundamental role in shaping children's communicative abilities, social identities, and understanding the cultural environments in which they live. At this stage of development, language is not simply a system of vocabulary, grammar, and linguistic structures; it is also a means through which children interpret experiences, establish social relationships, express identities, and understand cultural values. Consequently, effective language education should provide learners with opportunities to

*Corresponding Author
dewamadeagustawan.98@gmail.com

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encounter language in meaningful situations rather than treating language as a set of decontextualized linguistic forms. In increasingly multilingual and multicultural societies, this perspective is particularly important because language learning is closely connected to cultural understanding and the development of respect for diversity. UNESCO (2025) emphasizes that languages function as important mechanisms for transferring knowledge and preserving cultural heritage, while multilingual education can contribute to inclusive learning environments in which linguistic and cultural diversity are valued.

The meaningful language learning for elementary school students, is closely associated with their immediate social and cultural experiences. Children construct knowledge through interaction with family members, teachers, peers, communities, and their physical environments. Therefore, learning activities that connect classroom content with everyday experiences may provide stronger opportunities for children to understand and use language functionally. Rather than learning vocabulary or expressions solely through textbooks and repetitive exercises, students can encounter language through activities such as describing their surroundings, interviewing family members, retelling local stories, discussing community traditions, participating in cultural activities, or communicating with people in their immediate environment. Such activities can transform language learning into an experiential process in which linguistic knowledge is acquired simultaneously with social and cultural understanding.

The recent research supports the importance of contextualizing learning through local culture and real-life experiences. Susandi et al. (2025), for example, found that the integration of local wisdom into contextual teaching and learning in elementary education created opportunities for students to develop oral and written communication while connecting learning with their cultural environment. Their study indicates that learning activities conducted both inside and outside the classroom can make language learning more relevant and immersive. The integration of local wisdom was also associated with broader perspectives and tolerance, demonstrating that language development and cultural understanding can be developed simultaneously rather than as separate educational objectives.

The relevance of culturally contextualized language learning is particularly evident in Indonesia, a country characterized by extensive linguistic and cultural diversity. Indonesian elementary school students encounter multiple forms of cultural expression through local languages, traditional narratives, customary practices, community activities, arts, food, games, and interpersonal relationships. These cultural resources represent authentic contexts that can be transformed into pedagogical resources for language education. Nurpratiwiningsih et al. (2023) argue that local wisdom can serve as a learning innovation in elementary schools because it can increase students' interest, enrich learning experiences, and strengthen cultural identity. However, the authors also identify challenges related to limited resources and insufficient institutional and governmental support.

The use of local cultural contexts is also relevant to the development of language literacy. Language literacy involves more than the technical ability to read and write; it includes the capacity to understand, interpret, communicate, and connect information with particular social and cultural contexts. When language materials are derived from students' own environments, learners may be better positioned to connect new concepts with prior knowledge and personal

experiences. Recent studies in Indonesian elementary education have consequently explored local wisdom-based materials as a means of strengthening language skills. For example, research on local-wisdom-based instructional materials for fifth-grade students found significant improvement in reading skills following the implementation of culturally relevant teaching materials. The findings suggest that local narratives can provide meaningful resources for literacy development while simultaneously increasing students' engagement with learning.

Similarly, culturally responsive teaching provides an important conceptual framework for connecting students' cultural backgrounds with classroom learning. Culturally responsive approaches recognize that students enter classrooms with diverse cultural knowledge, experiences, linguistic resources, and ways of interpreting the world. Integrating these resources into instruction can create a cognitive and experiential bridge between students' existing knowledge and new learning materials. Recent research involving elementary students has demonstrated that culturally responsive teaching modules can be used to connect narrative-text instruction with students' everyday cultural experiences and improve reading comprehension. Kuswandi (2024) specifically developed a culturally responsive teaching module incorporating the local culture of West Java and reported its potential to support elementary students' comprehension of narrative texts.

The relationship between language and culture becomes even more significant when considering the development of intercultural competence. Contemporary education requires children not only to understand their own cultural backgrounds but also to develop the ability to recognize, respect, and communicate across cultural differences. Intercultural learning should therefore begin during the early years of education rather than being postponed until secondary or higher education. Butler and Jiang (2024) emphasize that young children are capable of participating in intercultural activities when appropriate guidance and pedagogical support are provided. Their synthesis of intercultural learning in preschool and primary education highlights the importance of incorporating intercultural dimensions into language-learning environments for young learners.

The real-life contexts provide an effective foundation for such intercultural learning because culture is experienced through everyday practices rather than only through factual information. Students can learn cultural meanings by observing how people communicate, how traditions are practiced, how stories are transmitted, and how social relationships are expressed through language. In this sense, cultural understanding emerges through participation and reflection rather than through memorization. This approach is particularly valuable for elementary students because concrete experiences and familiar situations can help them understand abstract concepts. Learning about cultural values through stories, family practices, community events, or local environments may therefore provide a more accessible pathway to cultural understanding than relying exclusively on abstract explanations.

Nevertheless, the integration of real-life cultural contexts into language education remains challenging. Language instruction may still rely heavily on standardized textbooks, predetermined exercises, and linguistic outcomes, leaving limited space for students' lived experiences and local cultural knowledge. Recent studies indicate that local wisdom is not always systematically incorporated into elementary language learning. Research examining

Indonesian language textbooks, for instance, has reported that local wisdom may appear only as supplementary examples rather than as an integrated instructional framework, placing considerable responsibility on teachers to contextualize learning materials through locally relevant narratives and experiences. Such conditions indicate a need for pedagogical approaches that deliberately connect language learning with students' everyday environments while maintaining alignment with curricular objectives.

This issue is particularly relevant in the context of globalization and rapid technological development. Children are increasingly exposed to cultural representations through digital media, online communication, entertainment, and global popular culture. While such exposure can broaden children's perspectives, it can also create a distance between formal learning and the cultural experiences available within their local communities. Consequently, elementary education has an important role in helping students navigate both local and global cultural environments. Local cultural knowledge should not be positioned in opposition to global knowledge; rather, it can provide students with a foundation from which they can understand and engage critically with cultural diversity.

The recent evidence further demonstrates the potential of integrating local wisdom with language development. Susandi et al. (2025) report that contextual teaching incorporating local wisdom can make language learning more meaningful and connected to real-world situations, while Harziko et al. (2025) demonstrate that local-wisdom-based Indonesian language learning can support reading and comprehension development alongside the cultivation of cultural values. Likewise, studies of culturally grounded literacy emphasize that local cultural materials can connect students' learning with everyday experiences while strengthening cultural identity. These findings suggest that language development and cultural understanding should be conceptualized as mutually reinforcing dimensions of elementary education.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the development of language and cultural understanding among elementary school students through learning activities grounded in real-life contexts. The study focuses on how students engage with language through familiar social environments, everyday experiences, and culturally meaningful practices. By connecting classroom instruction with students' lived realities, this study seeks to demonstrate that language education can function not only as a means of developing linguistic competence but also as a medium for cultivating cultural awareness, identity, tolerance, and meaningful participation in society.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research to investigate how real-life contexts can support the development of language abilities and cultural understanding among elementary school students. A qualitative approach was selected because the study sought to examine students' experiences, interactions, responses, and reflections during learning activities situated within familiar social and cultural environments. Rather than focusing solely on measurable improvements in language performance, the study explored how students constructed meaning through authentic communication and engagement with cultural practices.

The study was informed by a contextual and culturally responsive learning perspective, in which students' everyday experiences, social interactions, and cultural backgrounds are considered important learning resources. The learning activities were designed to connect classroom language instruction with situations that students could encounter in their families, schools, neighbourhoods, and communities. Through this approach, language was positioned not only as an academic subject but also as a practical means of communication and cultural interpretation.

The participants were elementary school students enrolled in elementary school students grade 6 No. 2 Pengiangan, in Susut District and in Bangli Regency. The participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their involvement in the language-learning activities implemented through real-life contexts. The selection considered students' willingness to participate, their regular attendance during the learning activities, and their ability to participate in age-appropriate communication and reflection.

The research was conducted during 10 learning sessions over a period. The instructional context was selected because the school provided opportunities for students to interact with local cultural materials and everyday social environments. The research setting included both classroom and, where appropriate, community-based learning environments. These settings enabled students to encounter language through authentic situations rather than through classroom exercises alone.

The data collection was obtained from the relevant school authorities. Participation was conducted in accordance with appropriate ethical procedures for research involving children. The researcher explained the purpose and procedures of the study to the school and students in language appropriate to their age, while parental or guardian consent was obtained where required.

The learning activities were organized around real-life situations that were familiar and meaningful to the students. The activities were designed to integrate language development with cultural exploration through four interconnected stages: contextual engagement, language exploration, cultural interpretation, and reflection.

In the first stage, contextual engagement, students were introduced to a real-life situation related to their immediate environment. Depending on the learning objectives, contexts could include family activities, local traditions, community life, food, traditional games, local stories, neighbourhood environments, or everyday interpersonal communication. Students were encouraged to observe, discuss, and identify language expressions that occurred naturally within these contexts.

The second stage, language exploration, focused on developing students' ability to use relevant vocabulary, expressions, sentence structures, and communicative strategies. Instead of presenting linguistic forms independently of context, teachers introduced language through situations that students had already experienced or could easily recognize. Students subsequently practiced the language through dialogues, descriptions, interviews, storytelling, role-play, group discussions, and other communicative activities.

The third stage, cultural interpretation, encouraged students to identify and discuss cultural meanings embedded in the language and activities they encountered. Students were invited to compare their own experiences with those of their peers and to identify similarities and differences in cultural practices. Teachers facilitated discussion by asking questions concerning the meaning, purpose, values, and social significance of particular cultural practices. This stage was intended to move students beyond factual recognition of culture toward a deeper understanding of how language and culture are interconnected.

The final stage, reflection, provided students with opportunities to communicate what they had learned and how their understanding had changed. Students could express their reflections orally, through short written responses, drawings accompanied by descriptions, learning journals, or group presentations, depending on their age and language proficiency. The reflection stage was important for identifying evidence of students' developing language competence, cultural awareness, and ability to connect classroom learning with everyday experiences.

The data were collected from multiple sources to obtain a comprehensive understanding of students' language development and cultural learning experiences. The primary data sources consisted of classroom observations, student work, semi-structured interviews or informal conversations, and reflective activities.

First, classroom observations were conducted throughout the learning process. The researcher documented students' participation, language use, interactions with peers and teachers, responses to culturally relevant materials, and engagement in real-life activities. Particular attention was given to students' use of language for authentic communicative purposes, their ability to explain or interpret cultural practices, and their willingness to interact with perspectives different from their own. Field notes were recorded systematically after each learning session.

Second, students' learning products were collected as supporting evidence. These materials included written assignments, vocabulary exercises, short descriptions, storytelling tasks, interview results, drawings, group presentations, and reflective journals. The student products were examined to identify changes in language use and evidence of students' understanding of cultural concepts.

Third, semi-structured interviews and age-appropriate conversations were conducted with selected students and, where relevant, teachers. The interviews explored students' perceptions of the learning activities, their experiences of using language in real-life situations, and their understanding of the cultural practices discussed during the learning process. Open-ended questions were used to encourage students to describe their experiences in their own words.

Finally, teacher observations and reflections were considered as supplementary data. Teachers were invited to describe students' participation, challenges encountered during implementation, and perceived changes in students' communication and cultural awareness. The use of multiple data sources enabled the researcher to examine the phenomenon from different perspectives.

Result

The findings indicate that the integration of real-life contexts into language learning provided elementary school students with opportunities to develop language abilities while simultaneously strengthening their understanding of cultural values and practices. Analysis of classroom observations, students' learning products, reflective activities, and teacher observations generated four interconnected themes: (1) increased contextual language use, (2) active student participation and communication, (3) development of cultural understanding, and (4) integration of language and cultural learning through reflection. These themes demonstrate that real-life contexts functioned not only as instructional materials but also as meaningful environments in which students could use language, interact with others, and interpret cultural experiences.

1. Development of Contextual Language Use

The first finding concerned the development of students' ability to use language in meaningful and recognizable situations. During the learning activities, students were encouraged to use vocabulary and expressions related to objects, activities, people, and cultural practices encountered in their everyday environments. Classroom observations indicated that students were more actively involved when the language materials were connected to situations that they had previously experienced.

The students demonstrated language use through activities such as describing familiar objects and environments, discussing family and community activities, retelling local stories, asking and answering questions, and presenting information obtained from their surroundings. These activities encouraged students to move beyond the reproduction of vocabulary and sentence patterns toward functional communication.

The students' learning products also indicated the emergence of contextual language use. Written descriptions and oral presentations demonstrated that students were able to connect newly learned vocabulary with personal experiences. Rather than producing isolated sentences, students increasingly used language to describe events, explain cultural practices, and communicate information to their peers. This finding suggests that real-life contexts provided students with meaningful communicative purposes and supported the development of language as a practical social tool.

An important characteristic of this development was the increased connection between students' existing knowledge and new linguistic information. Familiar experiences appeared to provide a cognitive foundation that helped students understand unfamiliar vocabulary and expressions. When students encountered language associated with experiences they already understood, they were able to use contextual clues to interpret meaning and subsequently incorporate the language into their own communication.

2. Increased Student Participation and Interaction

The second theme was related to students' participation and interaction during the learning process. The use of real-life contexts encouraged students to participate in individual, pair,

and group activities. Classroom observations showed that students were generally more willing to express their ideas when they were asked to discuss experiences that were familiar to them.

Collaborative activities created opportunities for students to negotiate meaning, ask questions, clarify information, and respond to different perspectives. In group discussions, students frequently exchanged information about their families, communities, traditions, and everyday experiences. Such interactions provided opportunities for students to practice language in relatively natural communicative situations.

The findings also indicated that students who were initially less active in conventional classroom discussions could participate more readily when activities were based on their own experiences. Familiarity with the topic appeared to reduce the difficulty associated with generating ideas. Students did not need to rely entirely on information provided by the teacher because they could draw upon their own experiences as sources of content.

Teacher observations further indicated that contextual activities encouraged a more interactive classroom atmosphere. The teacher's role shifted from being the primary source of information toward facilitating discussion, providing linguistic support, asking guiding questions, and helping students interpret cultural meanings. Consequently, learning became more participatory and dialogic.

3. Development of Cultural Understanding

The third major finding concerned the development of students' cultural understanding. Students were introduced to cultural practices through activities that connected language learning with their families, communities, and local environments. The findings indicate that students were able to identify cultural practices and describe several of their characteristics using the target language.

More importantly, students began to recognize that cultural practices have meanings and values beyond their observable forms. Through classroom discussions and reflective activities, students were encouraged to consider why particular traditions were practiced, how they were transmitted between generations, and what values they represented. This process enabled cultural learning to move beyond the simple identification of cultural objects or traditions.

Students also demonstrated awareness of similarities and differences between their own experiences and those of their peers. During group discussions, they discovered that students from different family or community backgrounds could have different ways of practicing similar activities. These differences became opportunities for discussion rather than sources of exclusion. Students were encouraged to listen to their peers and respond respectfully to alternative experiences.

The data further indicated the emergence of appreciation for local culture. Students demonstrated interest when cultural materials were connected to their immediate environment. Local stories, traditional activities, community practices, and culturally familiar experiences provided students with concrete references through which they could understand abstract concepts such as cultural identity, respect, diversity, and social values.

This finding suggests that cultural understanding was not developed solely through direct explanation from the teacher. Instead, it emerged through students' active engagement with cultural experiences and subsequent discussion and reflection. The real-life context therefore functioned as a bridge between cultural knowledge and students' personal experiences.

4. Integration of Language Learning and Cultural Understanding

The fourth finding demonstrated that language development and cultural understanding were closely interconnected throughout the learning process. Students did not learn language independently from cultural content. Instead, language was used as a medium through which students explored, described, discussed, and interpreted cultural experiences.

For example, when students discussed local traditions, they simultaneously practiced vocabulary associated with people, activities, places, objects, and social relationships. When they retold cultural stories, they practiced sequencing events and expressing ideas while also interpreting the values embedded in the stories. Similarly, when students interviewed family or community members, they developed questioning and listening skills while obtaining culturally meaningful information.

Students' reflective responses provided additional evidence of this integration. In their reflections, students were able to describe what they had learned about language as well as what they had discovered about their own culture and the experiences of others. Some students recognized that language could be used to communicate information about their community and cultural identity.

The findings therefore suggest that the boundary between language learning and cultural learning became less distinct when instruction was organized around authentic contexts. Instead of treating culture as an additional topic introduced after language instruction, cultural content became part of the communicative purpose of language learning.

5. Students' Reflection and Meaning-Making

A further finding emerged from the analysis of students' reflective activities. Reflection enabled students to connect classroom experiences with their personal lives and to articulate the meaning they derived from the learning process. Students were encouraged to identify new vocabulary, describe cultural knowledge they had acquired, and explain how the learning activities related to their everyday experiences.

The reflective data suggested that students gradually became more aware of the relationship between language, culture, and social interaction. They recognized that particular words and expressions could have different meanings depending on the context in which they were used. They also demonstrated an understanding that cultural practices are associated with values, social relationships, and community identity.

The reflection also provided an opportunity for students to reconsider assumptions about cultural differences. Instead of viewing differences as unfamiliar or problematic, students were encouraged to understand them as characteristics of diverse social experiences. This process

contributed to the development of respectful attitudes toward peers and different cultural practices.

Thus, the findings indicate that contextualizing language learning within students' everyday lives can support a more integrated form of learning in which linguistic development and cultural understanding occur simultaneously. The approach enabled students to connect classroom knowledge with experiences that were personally meaningful and socially relevant. Rather than positioning students as passive recipients of language and cultural information, the learning activities encouraged them to become active participants who used language to explore and communicate their own social and cultural worlds.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the integration of real-life contexts into elementary language learning can create meaningful opportunities for the simultaneous development of language abilities and cultural understanding. Rather than positioning language as an isolated academic subject, the learning approach connected linguistic knowledge with students' everyday experiences, social interactions, and cultural environments. The findings revealed four interconnected dimensions: the development of contextual language use, increased student participation and interaction, enhanced cultural understanding, and the integration of linguistic and cultural learning through reflection. These findings support the growing argument that language education for young learners should move beyond decontextualized linguistic instruction and provide opportunities for students to use language for authentic communicative and cultural purposes.

1. Real-Life Contexts as Meaningful Language-Learning Resources

The development of contextual language use observed in this study suggests that students benefited from learning language through situations that were familiar and personally meaningful. When students discussed family activities, community practices, local stories, and their immediate environments, language was presented as a functional tool for communication rather than merely as a collection of vocabulary items and grammatical structures. This finding is consistent with Susandi et al. (2025), who reported that incorporating local wisdom into contextual learning could provide elementary students with opportunities to develop language through meaningful experiences inside and outside the classroom.

The importance of contextualization can be understood in relation to the nature of children's learning. Elementary school students are still developing their ability to connect abstract concepts with concrete experiences. Consequently, language presented through familiar people, places, objects, and activities may provide cognitive and experiential support for comprehension. When students already possess knowledge of a particular situation, they can use that knowledge to infer linguistic meanings and construct new associations. In this study, the students' ability to connect newly learned vocabulary and expressions with their personal experiences suggests that contextual learning may facilitate the transition from receptive knowledge to functional language use.

These findings are also relevant to contemporary discussions of culturally responsive education. Culturally responsive approaches emphasize the importance of recognizing students' cultural knowledge and experiences as resources for learning rather than treating them as separate from formal education. The use of local cultural contexts therefore has the potential to create continuity between students' home, community, and school experiences. Kuswandi (2024), for example, demonstrated the potential of culturally responsive instructional materials based on local culture to support elementary students' comprehension of narrative texts. The present findings extend this perspective by indicating that cultural context can be integrated not only into learning materials but also into communicative activities and students' lived experiences.

2. Social Interaction and Active Participation

Another important finding was the increase in student participation and interaction during contextual learning activities. Students were encouraged to discuss experiences, exchange information, ask questions, and present their ideas to peers. This pattern indicates that real-life contexts can provide a meaningful basis for collaborative language use. Instead of responding primarily to predetermined textbook questions, students were able to draw upon their own experiences and knowledge as communicative resources.

The increased participation observed in this study is pedagogically significant because meaningful language development requires opportunities for learners to produce and negotiate meaning. When students interact with peers, they are exposed to different ways of expressing ideas and are required to clarify, reformulate, or expand their own messages. Such interaction may contribute not only to linguistic development but also to confidence and willingness to communicate.

The findings also suggest that contextual learning may reduce barriers to participation for students who are less inclined to speak in conventional classroom situations. Familiar topics provide students with content that they already understand, reducing the cognitive burden associated with simultaneously generating ideas and expressing unfamiliar content. Consequently, students may be able to devote greater attention to language use itself.

This finding has implications for the role of the teacher. In the learning process examined in this study, the teacher functioned less as the sole provider of linguistic and cultural information and more as a facilitator of interaction and reflection. The teacher provided scaffolding, introduced relevant vocabulary, guided discussions, and helped students interpret cultural meanings. This role is particularly important in elementary education because students may require structured support to transform everyday experiences into meaningful learning.

3. Development of Cultural Understanding Through Experience

The findings further indicate that real-life contexts contributed to students' cultural understanding. Importantly, cultural learning did not occur simply through the presentation of information about traditions or cultural objects. Students encountered culture through experiences, conversations, observations, and discussions concerning the meanings and values associated with particular practices. This distinction is important because cultural understanding involves more than factual knowledge.

Students' recognition of similarities and differences among their experiences also suggests the emergence of an intercultural dimension in the learning process. When students discussed their experiences with peers, they discovered that similar activities could be practiced differently across families or communities. Such encounters provided opportunities to develop respect for diversity and to understand that cultural practices are shaped by particular social contexts.

This finding is consistent with recent scholarship emphasizing the importance of intercultural learning in primary education. Butler and Jiang (2024) argue that young learners can participate in intercultural learning when pedagogical activities are appropriately designed for their developmental characteristics. The present study supports this perspective by demonstrating that intercultural understanding can emerge from relatively simple classroom activities when students are encouraged to compare experiences, listen to others, and reflect on cultural meanings.

The use of local cultural contexts is particularly relevant to Indonesia, where students live within diverse linguistic and cultural environments. Nurpratiwiningsih et al. (2023) emphasize that local wisdom can function as an educational resource that strengthens students' engagement and cultural identity. Similarly, recent research has demonstrated the potential of local-wisdom-based learning to support language development while maintaining connections with cultural values (Harziko et al., 2025). The findings of the present study reinforce these arguments by showing that local culture can serve simultaneously as content for cultural learning and as a context for language use.

4. The Integration of Language and Culture

One of the most significant findings is the close relationship between language development and cultural understanding. The results suggest that these two dimensions should not be treated as independent learning objectives. When students used language to describe traditions, retell local stories, interview family members, or explain community practices, language functioned as a medium through which cultural meanings were constructed and communicated.

This integrated relationship is particularly important because cultural meanings are frequently embedded in language. Words, expressions, forms of address, narratives, and communicative practices may reflect social relationships and cultural values. Consequently, teaching language without attention to context may limit students' understanding of how language functions in actual communication.

The findings therefore support a shift from viewing culture as an additional component of language instruction toward viewing culture as an integral dimension of language use. This perspective is consistent with UNESCO's (2025) emphasis on the relationship between language, cultural heritage, identity, and inclusive education. In multilingual and multicultural contexts, maintaining connections between language and culture can contribute to students' appreciation of linguistic diversity while strengthening their sense of belonging.

The integration of language and culture also has implications for curriculum development. Rather than adding separate cultural lessons to an existing language curriculum, teachers can embed cultural dimensions within ordinary language-learning activities. Reading materials can

include local narratives, speaking activities can involve community experiences, writing assignments can focus on family or cultural practices, and vocabulary activities can be developed around culturally meaningful objects and activities. Such integration may make the curriculum more coherent and meaningful for young learners.

5. Reflection as a Mechanism for Meaning-Making

The findings concerning student reflection provide an additional explanation for how contextual learning can contribute to cultural understanding. Experiencing a cultural activity does not automatically guarantee that students will understand its meaning. Reflection provides an important opportunity for learners to interpret what they have experienced and connect it with prior knowledge.

In this study, students were encouraged to articulate what they had learned about language and culture and to connect the learning experience with their everyday lives. Through reflection, students could move from simply participating in an activity toward considering why the activity was meaningful, how it related to their identity, and how other people might experience the same practice differently.

This finding suggests that reflection should be incorporated deliberately into contextual language learning. Short written reflections, oral discussions, learning journals, drawings accompanied by explanations, and group presentations can provide developmentally appropriate ways for elementary students to process their experiences. Reflection also gives teachers valuable information about students' conceptual development and potential misconceptions.

6. Implications for Elementary Language Education

The findings have several pedagogical implications. First, teachers should consider students' immediate environments as potential learning resources. Family experiences, local communities, cultural traditions, and everyday social interactions can provide authentic material for language instruction. Second, language activities should provide opportunities for students to communicate for meaningful purposes rather than merely reproduce predetermined linguistic forms. Third, cultural learning should be embedded within communicative activities so that students understand culture through language use and interaction.

Fourth, teachers should provide sufficient scaffolding. Real-life contexts alone do not automatically produce effective learning. Teachers need to identify appropriate linguistic targets, prepare students for communicative activities, guide cultural interpretation, and facilitate reflection. Fifth, assessment should consider both linguistic development and cultural understanding. Portfolios, oral presentations, reflective journals, project-based tasks, and observation of classroom interaction may complement conventional language assessments.

These implications are particularly relevant in educational systems that seek to balance national curriculum requirements with local cultural diversity. In Indonesia, the incorporation of local wisdom into elementary education provides an opportunity to connect formal curriculum objectives with students' lived experiences. However, as Nurpratiwiningsih et al. (2023) note, the implementation of local wisdom-based learning may be constrained by

limitations in learning resources and institutional support. Therefore, successful implementation requires teacher preparation, appropriate instructional materials, curricular flexibility, and support from schools and educational institutions.

7. Contribution and Broader Significance

The contribution of this study lies in its integrated understanding of real-life contexts as simultaneously linguistic, cultural, and social learning environments. Previous studies have demonstrated the value of local wisdom, culturally responsive teaching, and contextual learning independently. The present findings suggest that these dimensions can be brought together within a single pedagogical framework. Real-life contexts provide students with authentic situations in which language is used, cultural meanings are explored, social interactions occur, and reflection takes place.

This integrated perspective is particularly relevant in contemporary education, where students increasingly encounter both local and global cultural influences. Connecting formal language learning with students' immediate cultural environments can provide a foundation for engaging with broader cultural diversity. Students can develop an understanding of their own cultural identities while simultaneously learning to recognize and respect differences.

However, the findings should be interpreted within the scope of the study. The qualitative nature of the research provides detailed insights into students' learning experiences but does not permit broad statistical generalization to all elementary school students. Furthermore, the effectiveness of real-life contextual learning may depend on factors such as students' age, language proficiency, teacher competence, available learning resources, and the characteristics of the cultural environment. Future studies could therefore employ mixed-method or longitudinal designs to examine changes in language proficiency and cultural understanding over longer periods and across different educational settings.

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that real-life contexts can provide a meaningful foundation for integrated language and cultural education at the elementary level. The approach shifts learning from the transmission of linguistic and cultural information toward active participation, communication, interpretation, and reflection. By positioning students' lived experiences as legitimate learning resources, language education can contribute not only to linguistic competence but also to cultural awareness, identity development, respect for diversity, and meaningful participation in social life.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the integration of real-life contexts into elementary language learning can support the simultaneous development of students' language abilities and cultural understanding. By connecting classroom activities with students' everyday experiences, social interactions, and local cultural practices, language learning becomes more meaningful, contextual, and communicative. The findings indicate that real-life contexts provide students with opportunities to use language for authentic purposes, participate actively in interaction, explore cultural meanings, and reflect on their own experiences.

The study further highlights that language and culture should not be treated as separate dimensions of elementary education. When students use language to describe, discuss, and interpret cultural practices, linguistic development and cultural understanding can occur simultaneously. Contextual activities also encourage students to recognize similarities and differences among cultural experiences, thereby fostering appreciation of diversity and respect for others.

From a pedagogical perspective, real-life contexts can function as valuable linguistic, cultural, and social learning resources. Teachers are therefore encouraged to incorporate students' family experiences, local environments, community practices, stories, and cultural traditions into language-learning activities. Such an approach can strengthen students' engagement while providing meaningful opportunities for communication and reflection.

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