



The Development of Balinese Language in Children Aged 5–6 Years in the Balinese Minority Community of Sulawesi Tengah

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ABSTRACT

Preserving the mother tongue is important in building cultural identity, especially in Balinese minority communities outside the area of origin. This study aims to determine the development of the Balinese language of children aged 5–6 years at TK Dharma Santi, Desa Kospa Dwata Karya, Kabupaten Banggai, Sulawesi Tengah. The study used a qualitative approach with observation, interview, and documentation methods. The study subjects included ten children in group B, parents, and class teachers. Data were analyzed using a phenomenological model. The results showed that the development of the children's Balinese language was quite optimal with five leading indicators: habituation to the use of Balinese, the ability to pronounce simple sentences, understand instructions, participate in conversations, and the use of question words. These findings indicate that school environments contribute to the preservation of the Balinese language from an early age.

INTRODUCTION

Language ability is one of the key indicators of early childhood development. Language functions as a communication tool and serves as a means of thinking, understanding the environment, and building social relationships. In early childhood, specifically between the ages of 5–6, children are in the golden age of language development, during which they are susceptible to stimuli from their surroundings. Therefore, providing appropriate and consistent language stimulation is crucial for children to develop optimal language skills. In this context, the mother tongue is central to first language acquisition.

The mother tongue is a child's first language from birth through interaction with parents and their immediate environment. This language forms the foundation of thought and how a child perceives the world. Furthermore, the mother tongue is a cultural identity marker, connecting individuals to their community. According to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, children's language acquisition highly depends on social interaction, especially within the family context. When children interact with parents and other family members, they learn the language's structure and the social and cultural values embedded in it (Yuliani et al., 2022).

With Indonesia's rich cultural and linguistic diversity, preserving mother tongues is critical. One of the regional languages rich in cultural values is Balinese. This language is used in daily communication and in traditional ceremonies, arts, and local customs. However, the Balinese language is currently facing serious challenges. The influence of globalization and the dominance of the national language and foreign languages, primarily through digital media and formal education, has led to a shift



in language use among younger generations. Many children are more accustomed to using Indonesian or even foreign languages in daily communication, while the use of Balinese is increasingly marginalized at home and in the community (Umiyati, 2021).

Understanding regional languages in early childhood strategically shapes their cultural and social identity (Saeed, 2021). A regional language is a communication tool and a medium for transmitting values, norms, and local wisdom that have developed within a community. When children are introduced to regional languages early on, they learn their linguistic structures and develop a sense of belonging to their ancestral culture. Regional languages also foster emotional attachment to their social environment, positively affecting their patriotism and appreciation of cultural diversity (Faridy et al., 2023; Indrawan et al., 2022). In addition, studies show that children's ability to understand regional and national languages can enhance their cognitive flexibility and critical and creative thinking skills (Munadifa & Ansori, 2024).

The main issue facing regional languages in Indonesia is the declining frequency of use in daily life, particularly among younger generations (Fajria et al., 2024). Balinese, a regional language rich in cultural and spiritual values, is threatened due to language shifts. Field observations indicate that the Balinese language is being replaced by Indonesian or even foreign languages at home, in schools, and through media. Findings from several studies support this. Umiyati (2021) noted that Balinese children are more fluent in Indonesian due to the influence of school and digital media. Research by Wardiani et al. (2025) found that urban parents tend not to teach Balinese to their children because it is seen as less practical. Insani and Ridha (2025) added that urbanization and globalization have caused children to feel ashamed of using regional languages, as they are perceived as outdated. Rustan (2020) also found that the lack of support from formal education systems for using Balinese further exacerbates the situation. Even in rural areas, the family's role in preserving regional languages is weakening due to the dominance of digital media content in non-local languages. As a result, children have limited understanding and pronunciation of Balinese, which could lead to the eventual extinction of the language.

This phenomenon of language shift is occurring not only in urban areas but is also starting to affect rural regions. This reflects changes in the development of Balinese language proficiency among children, particularly as a mother tongue. In the past, Balinese was dominantly used in daily communication, but now it is being replaced by Indonesian or more widely spoken languages. Children's language development shows a decrease in the use of Balinese in both formal and informal contexts. This indicates that Balinese language skills among young children are weakening, which could threaten future regional language sustainability (Budiasih & Sukarsa, 2023).

Amid these changes, there are still communities that have successfully maintained the use of their regional language, one of which is the village of Kospa Dwata Karya. In this village, Balinese continues to be the primary language used in family and community communication. Children grow up in an environment rich in regional language through daily verbal interaction and traditional cultural forms such as tembang (songs) and statues (folktales). This demonstrates that in environments where the mother tongue is consistently preserved and cultural awareness is high among parents, Balinese can still be effectively maintained within the family (Widiantana, 2024).

Based on the above background, this study aims to describe the development of the Balinese language in children aged 5–6 years. In addition, it seeks to explore how the environment plays a role in maintaining Balinese as a mother tongue amid the challenges of modernization. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to efforts to preserve regional languages and serve as a reference for parents and educators in creating a language-rich environment that supports early childhood language development.

Unlike previous studies on the preservation of regional languages, which generally focus on the role of schools and formal education institutions example, Arnawa (2009) studied Balinese vocabulary acquisition among children aged 4–6 in Bali using a natural semantic metalanguage approach, and Adhiti et al. (2022) explored vocabulary development in Balinese-speaking children aged 4–5, emphasizing vocabulary quantity and sentence structure, this study offers a novel focus. It examines early childhood children from a Balinese minority community in Sulawesi Tengah. Children in a minority setting naturally face different challenges in preserving Balinese within an environment dominated by other languages. This study also positions children as active subjects in their regional



language environment, not merely passive recipients of formal instruction. By conducting research in Kospa Dwata Karya village, where Balinese is still used in family interactions, the study offers a new perspective on the importance of the home environment as an adequate space for regional language preservation.

This study aims to understand and describe how Balinese language develops in children aged 5–6. It also aims to investigate the role of parents in introducing, instilling, and maintaining the use of Balinese as the mother tongue in children’s daily lives. Through this research, it is hoped that a clear picture will emerge of how mother tongue preservation takes place among minority children in Sulawesi Tengah, as well as how the school environment and parenting patterns contribute to children’s language skills, particularly in maintaining the existence of regional languages amid globalization and cultural shifts.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological approach, specifically Husserl’s (1965) descriptive phenomenology, aimed at understanding the meaning of individual experiences—particularly in the context of the development of the Balinese language in children aged 5–6 years. This approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to delve into the subjective meaning of Balinese language use by children and how the roles of parents, the school environment, and local culture influence this process. The study focuses on uncovering the “essence” of children’s linguistic experiences within their cultural and social context through in-depth descriptions from the participants’ perspectives, without excessive interpretation.

The primary subjects of this study are 10 children aged 5–6 years of TK Dharma Santi, selected based on inclusion criteria—namely, children who actively use Balinese in their daily lives according to initial observational results. Additionally, the researcher includes supporting informants consisting of the children’s 10 parents and two classroom teachers. Before data collection, the researcher obtained written permission from the school and parental consent through an informed consent form.

Data collection techniques include participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Observations were conducted over three weeks in the school environment, documenting children’s communication situations using Balinese in various contexts and employing non-structured ethnographic observation sheets. Interviews were conducted with parents and classroom teachers for 30–45 minutes using open-ended questions to gather information about the history, media, attitudes, and challenges in children’s use of Balinese. Documentation includes photos and administrative data related to children’s language development. The indicators in this study can be seen in Table 1.

Tabel 1. Indicators of Balinese Language Development in Children

Aspect	Indicators
Balinese Language Development	Habituation to using Balinese
	Ability to express simple sentences
	Ability to interpret meaning
	Participation in conversations
	Use of question words

Source: (Adhiti et al., 2022; Anggreni, 2024; Diari, 2023; Guntur & Rahayu, 2023; Widana et al., 2024)

To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, the researcher applied source triangulation by comparing data from children, parents, and teachers; technique triangulation through a combination of observation, interviews, and documentation; as well as member checking, which involved reviewing interview results with informants for clarification of meaning. Additionally, the researcher employed an audit trail to systematically document the entire process to ensure data transparency. For data analysis, the study followed several steps: data familiarization, categorization, thematic analysis, and interpretation (Figure 1).

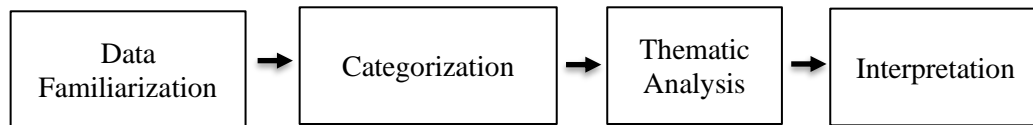


Figure 1. Data Analysis Flow Diagram

In terms of data analysis, the researcher used a phenomenological thematic analysis model (Noble & Heale, 2019). The steps included repeatedly reading interview transcripts and understanding observational findings, marking meaningful phenomena, grouping them into themes, and constructing essential descriptions of observed experiences and interview narratives that reflect the participants' lived experiences. The researcher used source triangulation to ensure data validity and reliability, comparing data gathered from children, parents, and teachers. In addition, technique triangulation was carried out by combining observations, interviews, and documentation results to gain a comprehensive understanding.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research was conducted by observing the development of the Balinese language in minority group children in Sulawesi Tengah. Observations were made during various daily routines and learning activities involving the use of Balinese, focusing on several predetermined indicators: habituation to using the Balinese language, the ability to express simple sentences, the ability to understand instructions and questions, the use of question words, and participation in conversations using Balinese.

Habituation to Balinese Language in the School Environment

Based on interviews with the teacher of the 5-6-year-old group, there have been consistent efforts to habituate the use of Balinese in the school environment. Teachers routinely use Balinese when greeting the children, giving instructions, and interacting during various learning activities. This is supported by observations showing that the children are already accustomed to using Balinese at school. This can be seen during the line-up activity before entering the classroom, where the teacher greets the children in Balinese, saying, "*Om Swastiastu rahajeng semeng anak-anak*" (which means *Om Swastiastu, good morning, children*). Some children respond with "*Om Swastiastu, bunda*," while others say "*Om Swastiastu bunda rahajeng semeng*." This habituation by the teacher helps children become accustomed to hearing and repeating phrases in Balinese.

Ability to Express Simple Sentences and Basic Vocabulary

From interviews with teachers and parents, it was found that the children can already speak basic vocabulary and simple sentences in Balinese without direct guidance from their parents. They can name foods and activities and express emotions in Balinese. Observations at school also confirmed this, as children described their lunch using Balinese, saying phrases such as "*Taloh megoreng bunda*" (mom's fried egg) and "*Be siap bunda*" (mom's fried chicken). Additionally, the children could express their desires in Balinese, for example, by saying, "*Bunda dadi mecando ajk timpal e*" (Mom, I want to play with my friend). This shows their ability to use simple sentences and basic vocabulary actively.

Ability to Understand Simple Instructions and Questions

Interviews with teachers and parents revealed that the children could already understand simple instructions and questions posed in Balinese at home and in school. Field observations supported this, showing that children could comprehend simple instructions from the teacher in Balinese, such as "*Adeng-adeng en main bola*" (Be careful when playing ball) and instructions during group prayer. The children also understood the Balinese teacher's questions. For example, when the teacher asked, "*Ujang belos baju ne?*" (Why is your shirt wet?), the children could respond appropriately. This was evident during observation, where the children responded in unison to the teacher's instructions and comprehended the questions asked.



Use of Question Words in Balinese

Interviews with teachers and parents confirmed that the children could use question words to ask questions in various contexts, such as asking about songs or how to write. Observations reinforced this fact, as children actively asked questions according to their needs and situations during learning activities, indicating the development of Balinese critical thinking and communication skills. In day-to-day learning and interaction, the children were already able to use Balinese question words such as “*apo*” (what), “*nyen*” (who), and “*kenken*” (how). For instance, when asking, “*Megendingen apo bunda?*” (What are we singing, Mom?) and “*Bunda kenken carane nulis ne?*” (Mom, how do you write this?), the children demonstrated appropriate questioning abilities in context.

Participation in Conversations and Use of Balinese During Play

Interview results indicated that a supportive social environment was important in encouraging children to use Balinese during play and peer interactions. Parents reported that their children actively used Balinese when playing at home and in the neighborhood. During recess and playtime, the children were observed actively using Balinese to communicate with their friends. They invited each other to play with phrases like “*Yok mecando ditu*” (Let us play over there) and chatted during games of tag with phrases such as “*Enggalen uber*” (Quick, chase!). These interactions show that the children understand Balinese and are confident and accustomed to using it in social contexts.

Based on the research conducted at TK Dharma Santi, it can be concluded that children in 5-6 years old children demonstrate positive development in their Balinese language skills. This development is evident across several indicators, such as the habituation of using Balinese in daily contexts, speaking ability, understanding simple instructions, the use of question words, and active participation in conversations. These findings not only reveal practical improvements in children’s language skills but also indicate a process of language internalization that occurs within the school environment, supporting the preservation of their mother tongue. This aligns with Cummins’s (2000) theory of linguistic interdependence, which asserts that second or additional language development (such as Balinese in this context) can occur effectively when supported by consistent social practice and environmental support. In the context of early childhood bilingualism, García (2009) highlights the importance of a *translanguaging* approach as a natural strategy that enables children to navigate and construct meaning through two or more languages flexibly. This also supports McCabe et al.’s (2013) view that children exposed to a second language tend to develop higher linguistic and social sensitivity early on.

Theoretically, these results can be understood through Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory of language acquisition, which emphasizes that language develops through social interaction, especially with adults and more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978). The children at TK Dharma Santi demonstrated that they acquired Balinese more effectively through collaborative activities, such as role-playing, singing, and conversing with teachers and peers. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) concept is highly relevant here, where children can reach a more complex language understanding and use it through assistance and encouragement from teachers who serve as scaffolding figures.

Bruner’s (1983) concept of scaffolding also reinforces these findings. Bruner argued that in a supportive learning environment, children progress through stages of language development with gradual adult assistance until they can speak independently. At TK Dharma Santi, teachers provided sentence models in Balinese, repeated phrases, asked open-ended questions, and responded to children’s participation with positive feedback. These strategies effectively facilitated children’s more active and meaningful use of the Balinese language.

Empirically, the researcher observed that most children could use Balinese actively in daily interactions, both when forming short sentences and when responding to teacher questions. The vocabulary mastered by the children included names of objects, emotions, and daily activities, as shown in phrases like “*taloh megoreng bunda*” (mommy’s fried egg) or “*kenken carane?*” (how do you do this?). These results demonstrate that the children were not merely mimicking sounds or word forms but understood their meaning and used them appropriately in context. The habituation of using Balinese in the school environment aligns with Boku’s (2025) statement that language control is not only dependent on general brain function, such as executive functioning. However, it is also influenced by the



surrounding situation or context.

This study reinforces the findings of Lestari and Prima (2022), who emphasized that local languages need to be taught early on as part of efforts to preserve local culture and shape children's identity. In their research, Lestari and Prima (2022) noted that Balinese language learning in early childhood education through thematic activities increased the vocabulary acquired by children by 35% in three months. This corresponds with observations in this study, where habituation in children's daily routines successfully developed communication skills in Balinese naturally.

Furthermore, research by Adhiti et al. (2022) supports this study by showing that mastery of basic vocabulary is key to language development in early childhood. They found that children who learned Balinese through songs and games could form simple sentences after six weeks of instruction. This is also reflected in the current study, where children could string vocabulary into contextual sentences such as "bunda dadi mecando ajak timpal e" (mommy, I want to play with my friends), indicating a progression from imitation to constructive language ability.

However, compared to the findings of Dewi et al. (2023), there is a notable difference in the role of parents. Their study in Bangli Regency, Bali Province, stated that a lack of family support caused children to be inconsistent in using the regional language at home. In contrast, this study on a minority group of Balinese children in Sulawesi Tengah found that most parents actively used Balinese at home and recognized the importance of preserving the local language as part of their cultural heritage. This demonstrates that family environmental support is a critical external factor in successfully acquiring regional languages.

This research also aligns with Brown and Bellugi's (1988) stages of language acquisition, which move from imitation and simplification of understanding the latent structure of language. Children respond to questions like "*ujang belos baju ne?*" (why is your shirt wet?) or asking questions themselves like "*megendingen apo?*" (what are we singing?) shows that they have moved past the initial stage and are beginning to demonstrate mastery of Balinese syntax and semantics. Ningtias et al. (2023) noted that children aged 5–6 years can compose complex sentences and have good listening skills, which is also evident in this study. The children do not listen and respond to Balinese conversations in formal settings and during free play. This proves that Balinese language learning is aligned with the children's cognitive and linguistic developmental stages.

In conclusion, this study reinforces previous findings. It offers new contributions, especially in how integrating local languages into school and home environments can foster more meaningful language acquisition, even among minority groups. The study shows that contextual, interactive, and collaborative approaches are effective strategies in regional language education for early childhood.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings and discussion, the preservation of regional languages through their use aims to prevent extinction and ensure that they remain familiar to children in their daily communication within the family and local community. Therefore, the family plays a crucial role in introducing the Balinese language. Introducing Balinese from birth is one form of early childhood educational stimulation. In addition to the family environment, the school and community also play important roles in preserving the use of Balinese among young children. Through the conducted research and observations, the researcher found that the Balinese language development of 5–6-year-old children in Class B at TK Dharma Santi has progressed as expected, with indicators including habituation to Balinese, forming simple sentences, the ability to interpret, participation in conversations, and the use of question words. The use of the Balinese language should be taught early so that children become accustomed to it and continue to use it into adulthood. Of the 10 children who were this study's subjects, all could use the Balinese language by the assessment indicators.

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