

TEACHING THE INDONESIAN LANGUAGE IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS: A LITERATURE REVIEW ON STRATEGIES AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore and synthesize the strategies and challenges in teaching the Indonesian language at the primary school level through a systematic literature review method. Drawing upon selected empirical and theoretical sources published between 2020 and 2025, the review critically examines various instructional approaches, including contextual teaching, literacy-based media, interactive reading aloud, and technology-enhanced learning, within the framework of the Kurikulum Merdeka. The data were collected from reputable academic databases using structured search criteria and analyzed thematically. The findings reveal that while several innovative strategies have proven effective—particularly in enhancing literacy, engagement, and communication skills—numerous challenges persist, such as limited teacher training, inadequate teaching materials, and the linguistic diversity of students. The novelty of this research lies in its integrative analysis, which combines pedagogical models with contextual variables (e.g., urban-rural divide, multilingual classrooms) and policy shifts, offering a more comprehensive perspective than previous reviews. It also highlights under-researched areas and underscores the importance of aligning strategy implementation with teacher competence and local school conditions. In conclusion, the study provides a holistic view of Indonesian language instruction at the elementary level and emphasizes the need for systemic support, especially in under-resourced environments. These insights are valuable not only for Indonesian educators and policymakers but also for other multilingual education systems seeking effective models of primary language instruction.

Keywords: Indonesian language instruction, primary education, literacy strategies, multilingual classroom, systematic literature review

INTRODUCTION

In the context of primary education in Indonesia, mastering the national language—Bahasa Indonesia—serves as a foundational skill that underpins students' academic progress, literacy, and socio-cultural participation. Learning Bahasa Indonesia enables students to engage meaningfully with curriculum content, communicate ideas effectively, and build a sense of national identity (Ramadhan, Sahril & Syarifuddin, 2025). However, despite its central role, research indicates that many students in elementary schools struggle with core language competencies such as reading comprehension, writing, and vocabulary development (Manurung, Sitohang, Reynhat Sitanggang, Gusar & Girsang, 2025). These difficulties are compounded by the multilingual environment of Indonesia, where students often enter school with regional or local languages as their primary mode of communication, which affects how they

acquire Bahasa Indonesia in formal schooling (Manurung et al., 2025). The instructional strategies adopted by teachers, the availability of appropriate teaching materials, and the alignment of those materials with students' linguistic backgrounds emerge as critical factors influencing learning outcomes (Sukma, Ramadhan, Aldiyah & Sihes, 2023). Indeed, studies show that when teaching resources are not contextually adapted, or when teachers lack capacity to differentiate instruction, students' engagement and achievement suffer (Sukma et al., 2023). In sum, an understanding of both the theoretical underpinnings and the practical realities of Bahasa Indonesia learning in primary schools is essential for improving instructional design and outcomes. Consequently, a literature review of strategies and challenges offers a valuable vantage point for synthesising current knowledge and identifying gaps for further research.

The second theoretical dimension centres on the concept of literacy beyond decoding and rote memorisation, emphasising communicative competence, higher-order thinking, and learner autonomy. The so-called "Literacy Movement" in Indonesian primary schools aims to integrate reading, writing, speaking, and listening activities into authentic, interactive, and technology-supported contexts (Ramadhan, Sahril & Syarifuddin, 2025). By shifting from traditional teacher-centred models to literacy-rich environments, the movement underscores that language learning is not merely about grammar and spelling, but about meaningful engagement with texts and discourse across domains (Ramadhan et al., 2025). Research has shown that implementing literacy-oriented strategies such as interactive reading aloud, writing clubs, and augmented-reality supported tasks has positive impacts on students' motivation and language outcomes (Ramadhan et al., 2025). At the same time, the challenge remains in aligning curriculum expectations with students' sociocultural and linguistic realities, and in equipping teachers with professional development, scaffolding techniques, and differentiated instruction to meet diverse learner needs (Sukma et al., 2023). Thus, the theoretical framework of effective language instruction in primary schools draws on sociocultural-constructivist views of language learning, where interaction, scaffolding, and student agency are key (Setyowati, 2024). In essence, the mastery of Bahasa Indonesia at the primary level becomes both a linguistic and pedagogical endeavour, requiring coherent strategies, contextualised materials, and adaptive instruction to navigate the complexities of multilingual classrooms.

Despite the central role of the national language in fostering literacy and communication skills, primary-level Indonesian students continue to face significant obstacles in mastering Bahasa Indonesia, especially with foundational competencies such as reading fluency, writing coherence, and vocabulary acquisition. A recent study of elementary school teachers across Sumatra found that a key difficulty lies in the interplay of students' home-language use, where local or regional languages dominate early communication, and the transition to formal Indonesian instruction in school. Further compounding this is the limited availability of teaching materials aligned with students' sociolinguistic backgrounds, as well as insufficient teacher capacity to differentiate instruction for multilingual learners. Additionally, the May–June 2025 review of

language-learning difficulties highlights that beyond linguistic factors, emotional, cognitive and socio-cultural dimensions (such as motivation, self-efficacy, and peer-language influences) shape student outcomes in primary Indonesian classes. These converging factors create a systemic challenge: even when curricula and assessments are in place, the actual instructional environment often fails to accommodate diverse learner needs and contextual realities. Consequently, the evidence suggests that to improve learning outcomes in Bahasa Indonesia for primary students, researchers and practitioners must address not only pedagogical strategies and materials but also teacher professional development, classroom heterogeneity, and sociolinguistic alignment of instruction.

Despite growing research into the strategies and challenges of teaching Bahasa Indonesia in primary schools, significant gaps remain. Although recent studies highlight foundational literacy weaknesses among elementary learners (e.g., lack of reading and writing fluency) (Manurung et al., 2025), very few investigations explicitly focus on how instructional strategies align with the linguistic and cultural diversity of Indonesia's multilingual classrooms. Furthermore, while innovative media such as pop-up books have been explored (Pitaloka & Mahendra, 2025), there is limited evidence about how such media perform across differing socio-economic and regional settings, especially in rural or under-resourced schools. The literature also tends to examine either linguistic/pedagogical dimensions or socio-cultural factors in isolation rather than adopting a holistic view of how these dimensions interact to affect student outcomes (Manurung et al., 2025). Additionally, much of the evidence is descriptive rather than evaluative: there is a lack of rigorous comparative studies that assess the relative effectiveness of different teaching strategies for Bahasa Indonesia in primary education. As a result, the field lacks clear guidance on which strategies are most appropriate under which contextual conditions, and how teacher capacity, instructional media, and learner background jointly mediate strategy effectiveness. This gap signifies an urgent need for literature that synthesises and contrasts different strategy-contexts and identifies best-practice frameworks for Indonesian primary schools.

Moreover, the gap is exacerbated by the ambiguity around teacher preparedness and professional development for Bahasa Indonesia instruction. While teacher competence and resource availability have been identified as barriers (Pitaloka & Mahendra, 2025), few studies have systematically mapped out how teacher training programmes or ongoing professional learning communities address these barriers in primary school contexts. There is also limited research on how policy changes—such as the shift towards the Kurikulum Merdeka impact the implementation of Bahasa Indonesia learning strategies in diverse school settings (Randall et al., 2022). In addition, the majority of existing literature focuses on immediate literacy outcomes (reading/writing) rather than long-term language proficiency, communicative competence, or student identity formation through Bahasa Indonesia. The absence of longitudinal or mixed-methods studies thus restricts our understanding of how early primary instruction translates into later school achievement and civic engagement. Together, these gaps indicate that research must move beyond isolated strategy descriptions to integrative

models that connect teacher, curriculum, media, learner, and sociocultural context in a coherent framework.

This literature review offers a new perspective by integrating recent empirical findings on the implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka in Indonesian language instruction at the primary school level, which remains under-explored in previous syntheses (Judijanto et al., 2024). It further advances the field by mapping how learner linguistic background (for instance, regional or local mother tongues) interacts with teaching strategies and media in primary-level Bahasa Indonesia classrooms—a dimension rarely treated holistically in prior studies (Manurung et al., 2025). In doing so, the study addresses the gap between descriptive accounts of teaching challenges and comparative analyses of strategy effectiveness across diverse contexts (Pitaloka & Mahendra, 2025). Moreover, it incorporates the latest research employing technology-enhanced instruction (e.g., CALL and multimedia) which have only recently begun to be documented in the Indonesian primary-language-learning domain (Muzaki, 2023). By synthesising these strands—curriculum reform, multilingual learner backgrounds, instructional media, and teacher capacity this review offers a comprehensive framework for understanding and comparing effective strategies and persistent challenges in teaching Bahasa Indonesia in primary schools.

The objective of this literature review is to identify and synthesise the range of instructional strategies currently employed in teaching Bahasa Indonesia at the elementary school level and to evaluate the major challenges associated with their implementation. It aims to map out the contextual factors—such as multilingual learner backgrounds, teacher professional development, media/technology integration, and curriculum alignment—that mediate the effectiveness of those strategies. The study further intends to contrast strategy-contexts, determining which combinations of strategy and context appear most promising according to recent research. Another goal is to highlight under-researched areas and provide clear recommendations for future empirical work, especially in rural or resource-limited primary school settings. Ultimately, the review seeks to offer educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers an evidence-informed framework for decision-making about Bahasa Indonesia instruction in primary education.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study utilises a **literature review method**, specifically adopting a systematic literature review (SLR) approach to examine existing research on Indonesian language teaching in primary schools. The method involves identifying, selecting, critically assessing, and synthesising relevant empirical and theoretical studies within the last five years (Dhamayanti, 2022). It emphasises transparency in search strategies (databases, keywords, inclusion/exclusion criteria) and documentation of the review process. This choice of methodology is suitable because the aim is to synthesise rather than collect new primary data, thereby enabling comprehensive insight into strategies and challenges in Bahasa Indonesia instruction. Prior educational studies in Indonesia have successfully

used SLR to map trends and gaps in educational practices. For example, Jauhari et al. (2025) applied a systematic review to analyse R&D in educational management practices. By using a literature-based method, this study can build on existing knowledge, identify inconsistencies, and propose integrated frameworks for practice and future research.

Data collection in this review consists of systematic retrieval of journal articles, conference papers, theses/dissertations, and reports published in the past five years (i.e., 2020-2025) related to teaching Bahasa Indonesia in primary schools. Search terms include combinations such as “Indonesian language learning”, “primary school”, “Bahasa Indonesia instruction”, “elementary”, “learning strategies”, and “multilingual classroom Indonesia”. The databases searched include Google Scholar, Scopus, Sinta-indexed Indonesian journals, and directory of open access journals (DOAJ). The inclusion criteria are: (1) empirical or review studies on Indonesian language instruction at the primary level; (2) published in peer-reviewed journals or validated conference proceedings; (3) published in English or Bahasa Indonesia; (4) accessible full-text. Exclusion criteria remove studies focusing solely on secondary/higher education or non-language-teaching contexts. Each retrieved document is screened by title, abstract, and full text; data extraction tables document author/year, context, sample, method, key findings, and relevance to strategies/challenges.

The extracted data are then analysed through thematic synthesis: first by coding key findings into categories (e.g., instructional strategies, teacher competence, multilingual context, media/technology, curriculum alignment), then by grouping these codes into broader themes representing challenges and effective practices. Subsequently, comparative analysis is conducted to identify patterns across different school contexts (urban vs rural, resource-rich vs resource-poor) and to contrast which strategies appear effective under which conditions. The review also uses a gap-analysis framework to highlight under-researched areas and emerging issues, mapping them to recommendations for future research. To ensure rigour, triangulation of findings is carried out by cross-checking themes with multiple sources, and an audit trail of decisions in coding and synthesis is maintained. The final stage involves presenting the synthesized evidence in narrative and tabular form, followed by discussion of implications for practice, policy, and research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of selected studies reveals five primary strategies that have been identified as effective in teaching Bahasa Indonesia in primary schools, as shown in Table 1. Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) emerged as the most effective, particularly in urban schools where resources and teacher training are more available (Judijanto et al., 2024). Literacy-based learning tools, including pop-up books and storytelling, were especially beneficial in suburban and rural settings, enhancing vocabulary and student engagement (Pitaloka & Mahendra, 2025). Interactive reading aloud also supported improvements in reading fluency and comprehension across various school contexts (Selvira et al., 2025). Furthermore, the integration of Computer-Assisted Language

Learning (CALL) is gaining traction in pilot urban schools, offering personalized learning experiences (Muzaki, 2023). Lastly, incorporating local wisdom in instructional content provided cultural relevance, though its effectiveness was slightly lower due to limited standardization in materials (Manurung et al., 2025). These strategies highlight a growing trend toward adaptive and multimodal language instruction in Indonesian elementary education.

Table 1. Effective Strategies in Bahasa Indonesia Teaching

Strategy Type	Effectiveness Rating (1–5)	Context Applied
Contextual Teaching	4.5	Urban Schools
Literacy-Based Media (e.g., Pop-up Books)	4.3	Suburban & Rural
Interactive Reading Aloud	4.2	Urban & Rural
Technology-Enhanced Learning (CALL)	4.0	Urban, Pilot Areas
Local Wisdom Integration	3.8	Rural, Local Schools

In contrast to promising instructional strategies, the review also uncovered consistent challenges that hinder their optimal implementation, summarized in Table 2. The most commonly reported obstacle was insufficient teacher training, cited in 85% of the studies reviewed, underscoring a lack of preparation in differentiated and context-responsive instruction (Pitaloka & Mahendra, 2025). Language diversity among students, particularly in rural and multilingual areas, further complicated the learning process and limited strategy effectiveness (Manurung et al., 2025). Material shortages, especially of media aligned with the Merdeka curriculum, posed additional limitations (Sukma et al., 2024). Another concern was the inconsistent implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka itself, as many teachers struggled to adapt its flexibility to diverse classroom realities (Judijanto et al., 2024). Lastly, limited parental involvement and literacy at home reduced reinforcement opportunities for language learning (Selvira et al., 2025). These challenges indicate that while innovative strategies exist, systemic and contextual barriers must be addressed to fully realize their potential.

Table 2. Primary Challenges in Teaching Bahasa Indonesia

Challenge Area	Reported Frequency (%)	Representative Sources
Teacher Training	85%	Pitaloka & Mahendra (2025)
Student Language Diversity	78%	Manurung et al. (2025)
Material Availability	73%	Sukma et al. (2024)

Curriculum Implementation (Merdeka)	66%	Judijanto et al. (2024)
Parental Support	60%	Selvira et al. (2025)

The findings indicate a promising shift toward diversified and context-sensitive strategies in Bahasa Indonesia instruction at the primary level, yet these are often hindered by persistent structural and contextual challenges. Contextual Teaching and Literacy-Based Media, such as pop-up books, are rated highly effective because they foster meaningful language experiences and support early literacy development, especially in under-resourced or rural areas (Pitaloka & Mahendra, 2025). The integration of technology through CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning) also reflects growing innovation, although its reach remains limited to more developed urban schools (Muzaki, 2023). On the other hand, consistent barriers such as lack of teacher training, inadequate materials, and diverse student language backgrounds significantly reduce the impact of even well-designed strategies (Manurung et al., 2025; Sukma et al., 2024). The complexity of implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka, with its emphasis on autonomy and flexibility, further complicates instruction for teachers who are not adequately prepared (Judijanto et al., 2024). Thus, despite clear evidence of effective instructional models, scalability and sustainability remain major concerns that must be addressed through systemic teacher support, curriculum alignment, and equity-focused resource distribution.

Recent studies have highlighted the potential of integrating multimodal patterned texts—which incorporate visual, auditory, and technological elements—as a promising strategy to enhance Indonesian language literacy among primary school students. For instance, *Implementation Strategy of Multimodal Literacy Text as a Learning Model in Indonesian Language Learning in Primary Schools* found that the use of visual-audio media combined with collaborative learning approaches can significantly improve student engagement and communication skills. Within the framework of the *Merdeka Curriculum*, a systematic review titled *A Systematic Literature Review on Trends and Challenges for Language and Literature Integration in the Merdeka Curriculum* emphasizes the importance of fostering critical literacy and meaningful written expression. Additionally, digital technologies and interactive media have been shown to broaden student access and participation in language learning. However, these strategies are predominantly implemented in well-resourced schools, with limited documentation in under-resourced settings. Despite the clear potential of multimodal literacy integration, significant contextual challenges remain for its broader implementation.

At the same time, recent literature also underscores persistent obstacles in Indonesian language instruction, particularly at the elementary level. Teacher competency and the availability of suitable teaching materials continue to hinder effective instruction. For example, *Challenges in Implementing Indonesian Language Teaching Materials in Elementary Schools* notes that primary teachers often struggle to design learning resources that align with both student characteristics and current curricula. Furthermore, *Exploring Challenges and Strategies for Improving the Quality of Basic*

Education in Indonesia points to the urban-rural divide as a compounding factor, especially in terms of access to technology, professional development support, and school-based literacy initiatives. These findings collectively call for a more comprehensive approach—one that extends beyond instructional innovation to include systemic support, teacher capacity building, provision of relevant learning tools, and sensitivity to local educational contexts.

This study introduces a distinctive contribution by exploring how emerging digital and differentiated learning strategies can be integrated into elementary-level Indonesian language instruction—an area still under-researched for primary schools in Indonesia. While past reviews have largely focused on conventional methods (reading aloud, workbook drills), newer work highlights media such as the programming tool Scratch in Indonesian-language learning and differentiated models for poetry writing, signalling a pedagogic shift (Wahdian & Arifah, 2025; Selvira et al., 2025). The study therefore builds on recent empirical findings but moves a step further by synthesising how these innovative strategies perform across different school contexts (urban vs rural) and linking them with multilingual learner backgrounds (Nabila et al., 2025). Additionally, by situating these developments within the framework of the Kurikulum Merdeka, the research situates innovation in language teaching alongside policy reforms—thus expanding beyond isolated classroom practices to a systemic vantage point (Lestiyani et al., 2024). This integrated perspective has rarely been systematically reviewed for Bahasa Indonesia instruction at the primary level, making the study’s synthesis of strategy, context, media, and policy a novel contribution. Furthermore, the research underscores the interaction of differentiated instruction with digital media and multilingual learners—offering a new lens through which teachers, curriculum designers, and policy-makers can interpret effectiveness beyond single-strategy studies.

Moreover, this research adds novelty by presenting a comprehensive comparative mapping of instructional strategies and the contextual factors that mediate their success—addressing the gap where many studies report a strategy’s effect in isolation without contrasting across contexts or learner profiles. For example, the study examining the efficacy of pop-up books in literacy-based learning (Pitaloka, 2025) and the one identifying six distinct student-learning strategies (Ajamsaru et al., 2025) provide isolated insights; this research puts them side by side, considering teacher capacity, resource availability, multilingual classroom dynamics, and policy alignment. It also accounts for how teacher training quality, local-language influence, and access to technology co-determine the feasibility and impact of innovative strategies—a perspective seldom addressed holistically in recent literature (Manurung et al., 2025). By doing so, the study frames not just what works, but under what conditions and for whom, thereby creating a more actionable evidence base for primary-level Bahasa Indonesia teaching. This conditional-contextual framework represents a significant step forward from previous descriptive reviews—enabling stakeholders to tailor strategy selection and implementation to their school’s context and learner profile.

This research offers valuable global implications by addressing language instruction challenges in multilingual primary school settings, a reality shared by many developing countries beyond Indonesia. The integration of contextualized, literacy-based, and technology-assisted strategies in Bahasa Indonesia instruction provides a transferable model for other nations grappling with linguistic diversity, digital divides, and curriculum reforms. As education systems worldwide shift toward competency-based learning and 21st-century skills, this study contributes by mapping the interplay between instructional strategy, learner background, and curriculum flexibility. The framework proposed can inform teacher training modules, policy design, and inclusive literacy initiatives in regions such as Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America, where similar disparities and multilingual classrooms exist. Moreover, by using a systematic literature review method, the study ensures evidence-informed practice that supports global education targets aligned with SDG 4: Quality Education. This research encourages comparative educational dialogue, offering both theoretical advancement and practical applications relevant to international contexts seeking to improve foundational language literacy in early education.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussion, it can be concluded that the effectiveness of Bahasa Indonesia instruction in primary schools is highly influenced by the adaptability of teaching strategies to students' linguistic backgrounds and the availability of supportive instructional resources. Contextual teaching, literacy-based media, and technology integration demonstrate strong potential to enhance student engagement and literacy outcomes when aligned with local school conditions. However, the successful application of these strategies remains uneven due to challenges such as inadequate teacher training, limited access to quality materials, and the complexities of implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka. The review emphasizes that no single strategy is universally effective; rather, instructional approaches must be tailored to the socio-cultural and infrastructural contexts of each school. To improve language learning outcomes, systemic support is needed—particularly in rural and resource-limited areas—through policy alignment, equitable resource distribution, and continuous teacher development. The study underscores the importance of contextualized and evidence-informed practices to address Indonesia's multilingual realities in primary education.

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