

INTEGRATION OF LANGUAGE LEARNING AND CHARACTER VALUES IN EARLY-GRADE CHILDREN'S STORYBOOKS

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Abstract

This study looks at how language learning and character values come together in the children's storybooks that early-grade elementary students read. We took a qualitative descriptive approach, running a content analysis on 25 storybooks and backing it up with classroom observation and interviews with teachers and students, in order to pin down the character values that dominate these texts and the strategies teachers use to weave them into the four language skills. Five characters values stood out as dominant — responsibility, honesty, cooperation, environmental care, and independence — alongside a three-phase integration model: pre-reading (listening, moral feeling), during-reading (reading, moral knowing), and post-reading (speaking and writing, moral action). Writing and speaking activities such as reflective journals and role-playing turned out to be central in turning moral understanding into a personal commitment. These findings feed into the development of character-based language teaching materials and support the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in early-grade classrooms.

Keywords: children's storybook, character values, language learning, early-grade literacy

I. INTRODUCTION

Character education has become a central concern in the development of national education in Indonesia. Under the Merdeka Curriculum, character education is treated as an essential thread running through every subject, including language instruction at the elementary level, with the aim of building twenty-first-century skills alongside strong character traits such as honesty, responsibility, and social concern.

A number of earlier studies have pointed to the potential of children's storybooks as a vehicle for character formation. Yusnidar and Khairani (2020) found that reading value-laden stories improved early-grade students' understanding of social attitudes, while Astuti (2019) concluded that picture storybooks build empathy and reading skill at the same time. Development-oriented research is also common: Fauziddin and Mufarizuddin (2022), for instance, demonstrated the effect of picture storybooks on early-childhood character development, and Apriliani and Radia (2020) developed picture storybooks to boost elementary students' reading interest. Astari, Lasmawan, and Ardana (2023) went a step further by developing picture storybooks grounded in local wisdom to instill the values of the Pancasila Student Profile. Taken together, these studies consistently show that value-laden stories have a positive effect on children's social attitudes and understanding, yet most stop at documenting impact or producing a book, without spelling out how such values are actually woven into the four language skills in classroom practice.

This gap is what motivates the present study: how are the character values embedded in children's storybooks concretely integrated into listening, reading, speaking, and writing instruction in early grades? Preliminary observation suggests that many storybooks used in

schools focus solely on linguistic aspects and leave the opportunity for character formation untapped, while books that do carry a moral message often go underused in language-learning activities. It is this mismatch between the potential of children's storybooks and how they are actually used in the classroom that underlies the urgency of this study.

This study sets out to identify the character values found in children's storybooks intended for early-grade students, to describe how language learning is integrated with those values, and to offer recommendations for using children's storybooks as an integrated medium for language and character education.

II. RESEARCH METHOD

We carried out this study using a qualitative descriptive approach, applying content analysis to 25 children's storybooks commonly used in grades 1 through 3 of elementary schools in the Bandar Lampung area. Primary data were gathered through participatory observation of how these storybooks were used in the classroom, together with in-depth interviews with teachers and students about the integration strategies they applied.

The study unfolded over three phases across six months. The first phase centered on collecting the storybooks and conducting content analysis to identify the values of Penguatan Pendidikan Karakter, or Character Education Reinforcement (PPK), along with the linguistic elements embedded in them. The second phase involved participatory observation and structured interviews aimed at uncovering patterns of integration between character values and the four language skills. In the third phase, we triangulated the data and formulated the final integration model.

Data were analyzed using the interactive model developed by Miles and Huberman (1994), which comprises data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data reduction focused on segments directly related to character values and language-learning integration strategies. We presented the data in matrices and tables to show the relationship between types of character values and language-skill activities. Final conclusions were drawn through source triangulation, across storybooks, teachers, and students, and through method triangulation, combining content analysis, observation, and interviews.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Content analysis of the 25 storybooks showed that character values are not distributed evenly across the texts. Of the eighteen PPK character values, five emerged as the most dominant and explicit in the narratives and illustrations (Table 1).

Table 1. Five Dominant Character Values in Early-Grade Children's Storybooks

No	Character Value	Percentage	Form of Representation
1	Responsibility	88%	Completing tasks, keeping promises, admitting mistakes
2	Honesty	72%	Small lies and their resolution as narrative conflict
3	Cooperation	60%	Characters helping one another reach a shared goal
4	Environmental Care	56%	Keeping surroundings clean, caring for animals, planting trees
5	Independence	52%	Everyday activities carried out without others' help

These findings indicate that children's storybooks tend to foreground personal and basic social values that match the cognitive developmental stage of early-grade students. Beyond identifying these values, the study also surfaced three models teachers use to integrate language skills with character values: integration before reading, during reading, and after reading (Table 2).

Table 2. Three-Phase Model for Integrating Language Learning and Character Values

Phase	Language Skill	Moral Focus	Example Activity
Pre-Reading	Listening	Moral Feeling	Ethical prediction questions before the story begins
During Reading	Reading	Moral Knowing	Identifying sentences that reveal a character's attitude
Post-Reading	Speaking & Writing	Moral Action	Role-playing and personal reflective journals

Pre-reading integration functions as an affective gateway, using ethical prediction questions to activate students' moral schemas before the story is presented. During-reading integration builds moral knowing by explicitly linking the text to a moral code through the identification of sentences that reflect a particular value. Post-reading integration, carried out through speaking and writing, marks the culmination of the process, since it pushes students to translate their understanding and feelings into concrete expression and a plan for moral action.

The prominence of Responsibility and Independence as the most dominant values fits with theories of moral and cognitive development in children aged six to nine, a period in which children move from egocentric thinking toward social understanding. Stories that show the concrete consequences of responsible behavior, such as a character who forgets to water a plant and watches it wilt, make it easier for children to grasp the link between action and consequence. This lines up with the view that moral action begins with disciplined attention to everyday tasks.

Honesty and Cooperation reflect children's capacity for social interaction and support the view that learning, character learning included, takes place through social interaction mediated by language. The Value-Based Story Mapping strategy identified in this study enriches conventional story mapping, which normally covers character, setting, problem, and solution, by adding a mapping of characters' ethical decisions. This trains students to analyze characters' motives and the consequences of value-driven actions, an approach that fits well with the Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on critical thinking from the earliest grades.

Compared with earlier research, our findings reinforce those of Yusnidar and Khairani (2020) and Astuti (2019), who reported that value-laden stories improve children's understanding of attitudes and their empathy, while going a step further by spelling out the integration mechanism through a three-phase model that structures all four language skills. The findings also echo Hatima et al. (2025) and Hayya and Setiawaty (2023), who showed that literary and local-story approaches are effective for instilling character education values in elementary students through language learning.

The dominant values identified here are also consistent with a number of storybook-development studies. Indriyani, Sudiana, and Kristian (2023), along with Khofifah, Naqiyyah, Wibowo, and Handoyo (2024), showed that culture- and character-based picture storybooks work well as a medium for character education in elementary schools, while Megawati, Lasmawan, and Gading (2022) and Mutiara, Wagiran, and Pristiwati (2022) specifically developed storybooks to instill discipline and the values of the Pancasila Student Profile. The

honesty and politeness values found in this study likewise match Mustikasari and Purwani (2021), who developed a fable book to cultivate politeness among elementary students. Meanwhile, the role of speaking skills in the post-reading phase aligns with Mulyawati, Marini, and Nafiah (2022), who demonstrated the influence of empathy on elementary students' prosocial behavior, underscoring how closely the affective and moral-action dimensions are intertwined in story-based learning.

A practical implication of these findings is that teachers need to spell out moral-intervention scenarios explicitly in their lesson plans, rather than simply noting the general use of a storybook. Book selection should also weigh the balance between explicit and implicit moral messages and should feature clear consequences for both violating and upholding character values, in line with the criteria for selecting character-building reading material proposed by Danawati, Regina, and Mukhlishina (2020) and Srimawirya, Musaddat, Jaelani, and Gunayasa (2021) in the context of thematic elementary textbooks.

This study is limited by its qualitative nature: the findings are drawn from observation and content analysis within a restricted setting of a few elementary schools in the Bandar Lampung area, so any generalization should be made with caution. The study also stops short of quantitatively testing how the integration model affects students' moral behavior; follow-up research using quantitative instruments and a comparative design is therefore recommended to strengthen these findings.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study shows that children's storybooks serve as an effective, integral medium for combining language learning with character education in early-grade students. The five most dominant character values integrated into children's storybooks are responsibility, honesty, cooperation, environmental care, and independence, all of which correspond to the social and moral developmental stage of children aged six to nine. Language and character integration can be optimized through a three-phase model: pre-reading, centered on moral feeling through listening; during reading, centered on moral knowing through reading; and post-reading, centered on moral action through speaking and writing. Writing through reflection and speaking through role-play prove to be the key mechanisms for turning moral knowledge and feeling into personal commitment, so that character education does not remain at the theoretical level but becomes internalized through linguistic expression. These findings offer a concrete model that early-grade teachers can use to design character-based language instruction, while also providing a foundation for developing teaching materials and policies on storybook procurement that give greater weight to character content alongside literacy.

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