

## **Stimulating Expressive Language in Early Childhood through Kalimantan-Themed Finger Puppets**

**Sabrina Wahyuningtyas Ananda Putri<sup>1</sup>**

Universitas Mulawarman  
[sabrinaningtyas0803@gmail.com](mailto:sabrinaningtyas0803@gmail.com)

**Nur Amalia Olby Anwar<sup>2</sup>**

Universitas Mulawarman  
[amaliaolby@fkip.unmul.ac.id](mailto:amaliaolby@fkip.unmul.ac.id)

**Malpaleni Sastriana<sup>3</sup>**

Universitas Mulawarman  
[malpaleni@fkip.unmul.ac.id](mailto:malpaleni@fkip.unmul.ac.id)

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### **Abstract**

*Early childhood education plays an important role in developing language skills as a foundation for communication in early life. However, the limited use of interesting and culturally relevant learning media can hinder children's participation in language activities. This study aims to examine the application of Kalimantan-themed finger puppets in storytelling and role-playing activities to stimulate expressive language skills in early childhood. A descriptive qualitative design was employed, involving a classroom teacher and 15 children aged 5–6 years at State Kindergarten 9 (TK Negeri 9) in Samarinda, East Kalimantan. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentation, and analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. The results of the study showed that storytelling and role-playing activities using Kalimantan-themed finger puppets created an interactive and contextual learning environment. Children demonstrated greater confidence in speaking, using new vocabulary related to local animals and cultural elements, expressing ideas and preferences, and interacting verbally with peers and teachers. These activities also provided opportunities for children to interact with local cultural values through meaningful play experiences. These findings indicate that finger puppet media associated with cultural contexts can support expressive language stimulation while introducing aspects of the local cultural environment to early childhood.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education (PAUD) is a crucial foundation for children's basic skills, particularly language development. This period is known as the "golden age," a time when children experience rapid development in thinking, communication, and socialization. Language serves as the primary means for children to express their thoughts and feelings and to interact with their environment ([Siddiq, 2025](#)). Early language stimulation must be designed in an enjoyable and meaningful way to ensure children's expressive abilities develop optimally. Learning methods in early childhood education must align with children's characteristics being active, imaginative, and learning through play. Interactive play using finger puppets provides children with opportunities to engage in meaningful conversations, imitate language, and express ideas naturally through symbolic characters. Such activities create a supportive language environment that promotes expressive communication from an early age ([Domek, Szafran, et al., 2023](#)). Through play-based activities, children can develop language skills naturally without academic pressure. The "learning through play" approach provides space for children to express themselves, use their imagination, and hone communication skills through interactive and contextual activities ([Colliver & Fleer, 2016; Parker et al., 2022](#)).

In early childhood education, media play a crucial role as a tool for conveying educational messages. Concrete media, such as hand or finger puppets, have proven effective in helping children express ideas, enrich their vocabulary, and practice speaking skills in an enjoyable way ([Alhan & Munawaroh, 2023](#)). In addition to being visually engaging, puppets create a safe environment for children to speak and use their imagination, allowing expressive language skills to develop naturally ([Meo et al., 2023](#)). Expressive language skills are a vital aspect of child development as they serve as tools for communication and social interaction ([Wieczorek, Hentges, et al., 2025](#)). These skills help children develop their social competence ([Wieczorek, DeGroot, et al., 2025](#)). Language stimulation should be provided from an early age so that children's communication skills develop optimally. Contextual learning that links material to real-life experiences makes the learning process more meaningful ([Gonçalves et al., 2022](#)). Classroom teachers who engage children in activities such as storytelling and direct communication can significantly enhance expressive language skills ([Putri et al., 2024](#)).

Based on observations conducted by teachers at State Kindergarten 9 in Samarinda, it was found that children's expressive language skills still require stimulation. This is evident in some children who tend to be passive during learning activities, lack confidence to speak in front of their peers, and are unable to express ideas and feelings coherently. The learning process is still dominated by conventional methods such as question-and-answer sessions and storytelling without the support of engaging media, resulting in low interest and participation among children in language activities. This situation highlights the need for innovation in the use of more interactive and enjoyable learning media.

Learning based on local wisdom can be a relevant alternative to implement. This approach integrates local values, culture, and potential into the learning process, enabling children to gain meaningful, contextual learning

experiences. Classroom teachers can apply this approach by presenting material relevant to children's daily lives, making it easier for them to understand and actively engage in learning. This approach not only supports the development of cognitive and language skills but also instills cultural values and strengthens children's local identity from an early age. Research indicates that local wisdom-based learning enhances children's engagement and creates more meaningful learning experiences because it is directly connected to their social and cultural environment ([Idhayani et al., 2023](#)).

Kalimantan, a region rich in culture, has great potential for incorporation into early childhood learning materials. The use of Kalimantan-themed finger puppets plays featuring local characters and animals not only serves to develop children's expressive language skills but also instills a sense of love for local culture ([Supiyah et al., 2021](#)).

Expressive language is a child's ability to convey thoughts, feelings, and ideas through words and non-verbal actions. This ability is stimulated from an early age as it forms the foundation for children to communicate effectively with their surroundings. Expressive language stimulation will be implemented through highly enjoyable play activities, such as finger puppets, storytelling, and role-playing, to help children express themselves naturally and creatively. According to Afian, expressive language is a child's ability to produce words to express what the child wants to say and what they know about their surroundings ([Afian, 2023](#)). Based on the background above, this study aims to examine the application of Kalimantan-themed finger puppets in storytelling and role-playing activities to stimulate expressive language skills in early childhood. This study is expected to contribute to a creative, interactive, and culturally grounded learning model relevant to children's needs in the modern era.

Several previous studies have shown that finger puppet media are effective in improving the language and social-emotional skills of young children. Finger puppets are a type of learning medium in the form of miniature figures or animals worn on the fingers to help children convey ideas and emotions through stories ([Maryati & Rohmalina, 2024](#)). Research conducted by Zulminiati and Hartati (2019) indicates that finger puppets can enhance children's listening skills. The quasi-experimental study involving toddlers found that higher listening scores were achieved with the use of finger puppets compared to storybooks (93.75 versus 87.5) ([Zulminiati & Hartati, 2019](#)). According to Atai et al., finger puppet media increases children's confidence, encourages active speaking, and enables them to express ideas using structured language ([Atai et al., 2023](#)). Research by Pandiangan & Nurmaniah confirms that finger puppet play also contributes to the development of children's social-emotional skills, such as empathy, cooperation, and self-expression ([Pandiangan & Nurmaniah, 2021](#)). In general, finger puppets are an interactive learning medium that combines visual, motor, and verbal elements to stimulate children's language and character development in an enjoyable way. Recent evidence also indicates that puppet-based learning media become more effective when children can relate the characters to their own experiences and cultural environment. Contextually designed puppet characters encourage children to communicate more confidently and use language meaningfully ([Ristiyani & Mulyono, 2023](#)).

Although research on finger puppet media and local wisdom-based learning in early childhood education continues to grow, there are still important gaps that have not been filled. Previous studies have mostly examined the use of finger puppets to support children's language development, self-confidence, and social-emotional aspects, while other studies have explored local wisdom as a foundation for strengthening children's cultural identity. However, research that integrates local cultural representations into finger puppet activities—especially to stimulate expressive language skills—is still relatively limited. In particular, the use of representations of Kalimantan's unique culture, such as traditional clothing and endemic animals, has not received much attention. Therefore, further research is needed to explore how finger puppet activities linked to cultural contexts can provide opportunities for young children to develop expressive language skills through meaningful play.

The novelty of this research lies in the use of Kalimantan-themed finger puppets as a medium that integrates local cultural elements into expressive language learning activities for young children. Unlike previous studies that generally used finger puppets with generic characters, this study employs finger puppets representing traditional Kalimantan attire and endemic animals such as the Bekantan, Orangutan, Enggang, and Pesut Mahakam. By integrating local wisdom into storytelling and role-playing activities, this study examines how culturally contextualized finger puppets provide opportunities for children to use expressive language while engaging with local cultural and biodiversity-related content.

Based on the above description, the research question is: How does a classroom teacher implement Kalimantan-themed finger puppets through storytelling and role-playing activities to stimulate expressive language skills in early childhood?

## **METHOD**

This study uses a descriptive qualitative research design to examine the application of Kalimantan-themed finger puppet media in stimulating expressive language skills in early childhood. This approach is considered appropriate because the research focuses on efforts to describe and understand children's participation, verbal and nonverbal expressions, and interactions during learning activities that take place naturally. Descriptive qualitative research allows researchers to explore participants' experiences and behaviors in natural settings and build an in-depth understanding of the phenomena being studied ([Creswell, 2009](#)).

The study was conducted at State Kindergarten 9 Samarinda, East Kalimantan. Participants were selected using purposive sampling because the study required participants who were directly involved in the use of Kalimantan-themed finger puppet activities and could provide relevant information regarding children's expressive language use and participation during the finger puppet activities ([Sugiyono, 2022](#)). The participants consisted of one Group B classroom teacher and 15 children aged 5–6 years. The classroom teacher served as the primary interview participant because of her direct involvement in planning, implementing, and evaluating learning activities using finger puppet media. The children participated in the learning activities and were observed during storytelling and role-playing activities to

identify their expressive language behaviors, including vocabulary use, confidence in speaking, verbal expression, and interaction with peers and teachers.

Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Classroom observations were conducted during the use of Kalimantan-themed finger puppet activities to document verbal and non-verbal expressions, participation, speaking behavior, and children's interactions during storytelling and role-playing activities. A semi-structured interview was conducted with the classroom teacher to obtain detailed information regarding the development of children's expressive language in relation to the implementation of these learning activities. Documentation—which included photos, field notes, and recordings of learning activities—is used as supporting evidence to provide additional contextual information and strengthen the interpretation of data from observations and interviews ([Moleong, 2021](#)).

The data collected was analyzed using the interactive qualitative data analysis model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña ([Miles et al., 2014](#)). This analysis involved three interrelated stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. In the data condensation stage, information relevant to children's expressive language development and their participation in finger puppet activities was selected, categorized, and organized. The condensed data is then presented through descriptive narratives, interview quotes, and observation notes to facilitate the identification of patterns and relationships. Finally, conclusions are drawn and verified by examining recurring patterns, relationships, and themes throughout the collected data.

The trustworthiness of these findings was established through source triangulation and technique triangulation. Source triangulation involves comparing information obtained from the classroom teacher with evidence observed in children's learning activities. Technique triangulation involves comparing findings from classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. These comparisons were conducted to test the consistency of the evidence and strengthen the credibility of the findings regarding the use of Kalimantan-themed finger puppet media in stimulating children's expressive language abilities ([Lincoln & Guba, 1985](#)).

## **RESULT**

Based on the data analysis, four thematic findings were identified: (1) children's confidence and verbal expression, (2) vocabulary development through local cultural content, (3) children's interaction and participation, and (4) children's engagement with Kalimantan cultural content.

### **1. Children's Confidence and Verbal Expression**

Based on classroom observations, children showed greater confidence in speaking during learning activities using Kalimantan-themed finger puppets. Several children who were usually reluctant to speak in front of their peers began participating in storytelling and role-playing activities. The use of finger puppets was associated with a more comfortable learning atmosphere,

encouraging children to express themselves verbally. This finding was supported by an interview with the classroom teacher, who stated:

“Pasti. Anak yang biasanya pendiam pun mencoba maju. Contohnya, Vito yang biasanya tidak terlalu berani, kemarin maju dan bercerita. Karena sesuatu yang baru, mereka jadi terdorong dan lebih percaya diri.” (Teacher Interview, June 2025)

Field observation notes also indicated that children voluntarily participated in storytelling activities and attempted to introduce the characters they played. These findings indicate that the use of Kalimantan-themed finger puppets provide opportunities for children to practice speaking and demonstrate confidence in expressing their ideas in front of others.

## **2. Vocabulary Development through Local Cultural Content**

Children demonstrated expanded use of vocabulary, particularly related to local animals and cultural elements. During classroom activities, children were introduced to various endemic animals of Kalimantan, including the Bekantan, Orangutan, Kukang, Enggang, and Pesut Mahakam. The classroom teacher explained:

“Iya, sangat membantu. Misalnya, sebelumnya anak menyebut semua hewan primata sebagai ‘monyet’. Setelah kegiatan ini, mereka mengenal istilah baru seperti Bekantan, Orangutan, dan Kukang. Jadi kosakata hewan mereka bertambah.” (Teacher Interview, June 2025)

This observation was also reflected in children’s verbal responses during the activity. Some children were able to correctly mention the names of the animals introduced through the finger puppet stories and role-playing activities. The observation data showed that culturally relevant contextual experiences provided opportunities for children to acquire and use new vocabulary in meaningful situations.

## **3. Children's Interaction and Participation**

Classroom observation results revealed that children actively participated throughout the learning activities. They took turns performing with the finger puppets, listened to their peers, and engaged in simple collaborative interactions during storytelling sessions. The classroom teacher described the interaction process as follows:

“Anak-anak saling bergantian tampil dan berperan. Mereka belajar menunggu giliran dan bekerja sama dalam kegiatan tersebut.” (Teacher Interview, June 2025)

Field notes further indicated that children were enthusiastic about interacting with their classmates while using the finger puppets. They responded to questions, imitated characters, and supported their peers during performances. Children's participation also involves social interaction, particularly turn-taking, peer support, and collaborative role-playing. These behaviors provide additional opportunities for verbal interaction during expressive language activities.

## **4. Children's Engagement with Kalimantan Cultural Content**

Children showed positive responses toward the Kalimantan-themed finger puppet activities. During the learning process, they appeared enthusiastic, curious, and actively engaged with the puppet characters representing local culture and fauna.

According to the classroom teacher:

“Anak-anak terlihat sangat senang dan terpukau, karena media ini baru bagi mereka. Dengan adanya panggung dan boneka, mereka tampak terkesima. Ekspresinya penuh antusias dan rasa ingin tahu.” (Teacher Interview, June 2025)

Children’s enthusiasm and curiosity created opportunities for active participation and verbal expression. During the activities, children expressed preferences, emotions, and ideas while interacting with the puppet characters and responding to teachers and peers.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Finger Puppets as a Support for Children’s Confidence and Expressive Language**

From this research, it was found that during storytelling activities using Kalimantan-themed finger puppets, children who were previously shy or passive demonstrated greater confidence in expressing themselves. The finding may be understood in relation to the symbolic and playful nature of puppets, which can provide children with an indirect medium through which to express ideas and emotions. In this context, the puppet characters may have helped create a less threatening setting for verbal participation. By communicating through puppet characters, children are able to express ideas and emotions more freely. This condition supports the development of expressive language because children focus on conveying messages rather than worrying about making mistakes. Therefore, the greater confidence in speaking observed in this study may be explained by the playful and non-threatening nature of finger puppet activities. Ristiyani and Mulyono (2023), using a different research design, reported significant improvement of children’s expressive language skills through storytelling activities ([Ristiyani & Mulyono, 2023](#)). Their study found that children became more active in expressing ideas, answering questions, and communicating confidently during classroom learning. These findings reinforce the present study, indicating that finger puppet media provide meaningful opportunities for children to develop expressive language through enjoyable and interactive learning experiences.

Finger puppets serve as a means of symbolic communication by representing social agents, making interactions more salient, and supporting dialogue, language, and the formation of meaning. Theoretically, puppets can be juxtaposed with other symbolic props because children can use them in role-playing or simulation modes to interpret social cognition, although this method has certain limitations ([Rakoczy, 2022](#)). In applied communication contexts, finger puppets introduced during infancy were associated with greater caregiver involvement, cognitive stimulation, preverbal communication, and receptive vocabulary at 12 months; daily users showed the strongest outcomes in a pilot including 180 enrolled families and 154

completers ([Domek, Heller Szafran, et al., 2023](#)). Puppets also facilitated dialogue with neurodiverse audiences and encouraged expression, creativity, and recognition of nonverbal communication ([Parsloe et al., 2025](#)).

On the other hand, storytelling and role-playing activities can facilitate expression by providing a less direct, creative outlet for communicating difficult experiences, while also supporting reflection, emotional safety, and efforts to make sense of those experiences. A study reported that children participating in art therapy activities found that storytelling, narrative creation, and doll play enabled them to express emotions that might not be conveyed through verbal communication alone ([Moula, 2021](#)). Furthermore, the use of puppets with young children can be considered part of a culture-preserving pedagogical model designed to enhance students' motivation and social identity by linking learning to cultural heritage ([Martadi & Sampurno, 2025](#)).

### **Kalimantan-Themed Finger Puppets as Culturally Contextualized Media for Expressive Language**

The finger puppets used in this study are unique because they feature characters and stories drawn from Kalimantan's local culture. The characters consist of distinctive animals such as the proboscis monkey, orangutan, slow loris, Irrawaddy dolphin, and hornbill, as well as figures wearing traditional Kalimantan attire (Kutai Kartanegara, Baamar Galung Pancar Matahari, Sangkarut, Dayak Lundayeh, King Baba). These local cultural elements add value to the learning process because children not only learn to speak but also come to know their regional identity through the stories presented. Interview results indicate that the use of Kalimantan-specific finger puppets enriches children's vocabulary. According to the classroom teacher:

“Iya, sangat membantu. Misalnya, sebelumnya anak menyebut semua hewan primata sebagai monyet. Setelah kegiatan ini, mereka mengenal istilah baru seperti Bekantan, Orangutan, dan Kukang.”

Before the activity, some children referred to all primates as “monkeys,” but after the activity, they could distinguish between different types of monkeys, such as the proboscis monkey and the orangutan. Children also learned new terms related to traditional attire, colors, and the distinctive shapes of these puppets. Beyond vocabulary acquisition, the findings also indicate the development of expressive language skills.

During storytelling and role-playing activities, children demonstrated the ability to answer questions, describe puppet characters, express preferences, and communicate ideas using complete sentences. These behaviors suggest that the children were not only learning new words but were also using language functionally to convey meaning in social interactions. Storytelling activities supported by finger puppets can improve children's ability to construct simple sentences and express ideas sequentially during classroom communication ([Hasanah et al., 2026](#)). Puppets were also reported to invite conversation, expression, creativity, and participation among children with disabilities, based on educators' accounts rather than a quantified language outcome ([Karaolis, 2023](#)).

This process demonstrates that culturally contextualized media helps children understand and retain new words more effectively because they are

accompanied by meaningful visual and emotional experiences. The acquisition of new vocabulary occurred because children encountered unfamiliar words within meaningful learning experiences. The visual representation of endemic animals and traditional costumes enabled children to connect new terms with concrete objects and story contexts. This finding indicates that contextual learning based on local culture can facilitate vocabulary retention and support expressive language development among young children. A research also supports these findings, highlighting the development of young children's expressive language skills through activities emphasizing interaction, role-playing, and two-way communication ([Masek et al., 2023](#)). Thus, finger puppet play shares the same principles as center-based learning, namely, providing space for children to naturally express their ideas, feelings, and thoughts.

Kalimantan-themed finger puppets also provided opportunities for children to practice multiple aspects of expressive language, including vocabulary, sentence construction, intonation, and verbal expression. Children do not merely speak unidirectionally but also learn to construct sentences, adjust intonation, and use facial expressions appropriate to the characters they portray. Teachers observe that children become more fluent in pronouncing words, clearer in conveying sentences, and capable of imitating a character's speaking style with precise intonation. This activity fosters children's expressive language skills through hands-on practice in a playful setting.

The cultural elements contained in the story through the use of finger puppets also function as a means of getting to know local culture from an early age. The children also demonstrated curiosity and pride in their local culture. They frequently asked questions about the names of costumes and the meanings behind the puppet characters they played. The findings also suggest that the cultural representations provided opportunities for children to become familiar with aspects of their local cultural environment.

Teachers assess that Kalimantan-themed finger puppets are flexible and can be used across various learning themes. This medium can be adapted to topics such as aquatic animals, the environment, or folk tales. This flexibility makes finger puppets a sustainable and relevant medium for supporting thematic learning in early childhood education. Overall, the research findings indicate that Kalimantan-themed finger puppets serve not only as visual aids but also as interactive tools that help maximize children's potential for speaking, expressing themselves, and socializing. Children had opportunities to speak with confidence, expand their vocabulary, express ideas, and interact with others while engaging with culturally relevant content. Through these activities, learning in early childhood education becomes more meaningful, enjoyable, and aligned with young children's characteristics. Innovative learning media developed in an engaging and interactive manner can provide opportunities for children to express ideas, use imagination, and interpret stories through enjoyable play experiences, as evidenced by the use of Kalimantan-themed finger puppets that encourage children to express ideas, use their imagination, and understand the meaning of stories through enjoyable play experiences.

Field observation results indicate that the Kalimantan-themed finger puppets activity fosters positive interaction between children and teachers. Teachers

employ dialogic storytelling techniques, ask open-ended questions, and provide children with opportunities to respond or continue the story in their own way. This strategy provided opportunities for children to speak in front of peers while developing their ability to respond to questions and contribute to the progression of the story. Thus, the Kalimantan-themed finger puppets serve not only as visual aids but also as culturally contextualized language-learning media that encourage children to think creatively, and communicatively within their local context. The findings of this study also support international research highlighting the importance of play-based and culturally responsive learning environments for language development. Interactive storytelling activities encourage children to actively construct meaning, communicate ideas, and engage in social interaction. When learning materials are connected to children's cultural backgrounds, they become more meaningful and support deeper language engagement. Therefore, Kalimantan-themed finger puppets may be viewed as a culturally contextualized learning medium that supports expressive language use while providing children with opportunities to engage with culturally relevant content.

These findings are also supported by Sadaruddin et al. (2025), who emphasized that storytelling-based learning creates authentic communication opportunities for young children ([Sadaruddin et al., 2025](#)). Through active interaction with teachers, peers, and learning media, children are encouraged to construct meaning, express opinions, and develop both receptive and expressive language simultaneously. This evidence further strengthens the argument that storytelling combined with culturally relevant learning media provides meaningful language experiences for early childhood learners.

Based on the results of this research, we also found that cultural contextualization can support meaningful language use, including by connecting linguistic forms to the life experiences, social norms, and communicative goals of early childhood learners. As stated in a study by Nganga et al., cultural contextualization in early childhood education can support meaningful language use by fostering contextually appropriate practices and involving collaboration with the local culture ([Nganga et al., 2020](#)). This is reinforced by broader educational evidence linking regional languages and cultural references to engagement and meaningful learning ([Payadnya et al., 2026](#)).

## CONCLUSION

This study shows that the use of Kalimantan-themed finger puppets through storytelling and role-playing activities creates a supportive and culturally contextual environment to stimulate early childhood expressive language skills. Classroom observations, interviews with teachers, and documentation showed that children demonstrated greater confidence in speaking, using vocabulary related to local animals and elements of Kalimantan culture, expressing ideas and preferences, and engaging in verbal interactions with teachers and peers. These findings also indicate that culturally relevant puppet characters provide meaningful visual and contextual support for children's language use during play activities.

The contribution of this study lies in its ability to demonstrate how local cultural representations can be integrated into finger puppet activities to create meaningful opportunities for expressive language use in early childhood classrooms. Rather than establishing cause-and-effect relationships, these findings illustrate how culturally contextual storytelling and role-playing activities can support children's participation and verbal expression in a natural learning setting.

This study was limited to one kindergarten, one classroom teacher, and 15 children aged 5–6 years. Therefore, these findings must be interpreted within the context of the study site and cannot be generalized to other populations or cultural contexts. Future research could involve more early childhood education settings and examine culturally contextualized finger puppet activities using mixed-method or experimental designs to further investigate their potential contribution to children's expressive language development.

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