



Integrating Sports and Health Themes in Bilingual Education: A Pathway to Polite Language Use

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ABSTRACT

Bilingual education plays an important role in enhancing students' language skills and character development, yet many programs overlook how language reflects politeness and cultural values. This study examines how integrating Sports and Health themes into bilingual teaching can foster polite language use among students at MA Al Fithrah Semarang. Using a mixed-methods quasi-experimental design, the study measured students' language performance and attitudes before and after implementing a thematic bilingual model. Findings show significant improvement in students' bilingual proficiency and a notable increase in their awareness and practice of polite expressions. The results confirm that context-rich themes, supported by the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) framework, make language use more authentic and meaningful. This approach not only strengthens students' technical skills but also embeds values of respect and discipline. The study implies that integrating relevant themes with bilingual instruction can help rural and underserved schools cultivate students' communication competence and polite behavior simultaneously, preparing them for global and local interaction with strong character.

Keywords: bilingual education, polite language, CLIL, Sports and Health, character building

•Introduction

Language plays a pivotal role in shaping the intellectual, social, and cultural character of learners. In the context of education, the way language is taught and learned determines not only linguistic competence but also how students develop values of respect, politeness, and social interaction skills that are essential for navigating increasingly complex, multicultural societies. In bilingual education, these aspects become even more significant as students must be equipped not only with technical proficiency in more than one language but also with the cultural literacy to use each language appropriately and politely within different contexts. The present work entitled “Integrating Sports and Health Themes in Bilingual Education: A Pathway to Polite Language Use” seeks to respond to the urgent need for contextually relevant, character-building language instruction that goes beyond mere vocabulary and grammar.

Bilingual education in Indonesia, as in many multilingual societies, has seen significant expansion over recent decades. The government and various educational institutions have increasingly promoted bilingual programs as a strategy to equip students with English proficiency alongside mastery of the national language, Bahasa Indonesia. This dual focus aims to enhance competitiveness in the global arena and open broader access to global knowledge. However, despite this progress, there remains a persistent gap: the emphasis on linguistic mechanics often overshadows the equally critical dimension of how language reflects and shapes values, etiquette, and intercultural awareness. Reports from diverse global literature indicate that bilingual education tends to prioritize linguistic performance measures such as grammar mastery and test scores over the nurturing of respectful communication skills and politeness conventions that differ across languages and cultures.

Global scholars such as Bassachs et al. (2022) and Bakhoda et al. (2022) argue that bilingual programs must be designed with an awareness of sociocultural contexts and the pragmatic aspects of language use. They note that when bilingual teaching fails to integrate these dimensions, students may develop strong technical abilities but still struggle with using language in socially and culturally appropriate ways. This gap often manifests in informal or even disrespectful communication styles within academic or public contexts, which can undermine broader goals of education as a vehicle for character development. In Asia specifically, several studies (He et al., 2022; Shin, 2023) highlight how emergent bilingual students face challenges in understanding and practicing language etiquette, especially when shifting between languages with different politeness norms, such as between English and Asian languages. Such differences include honorifics, levels of formality, indirectness, and other cultural markers of politeness embedded in language structures.

In the Indonesian context, the lack of explicit integration of *adab berbahasa*, or polite language use, within bilingual education programs is an identified weakness. Many schools introduce English as a medium of instruction or as a major subject, but the teaching resources and lesson designs often neglect the explicit cultivation of polite speech patterns. Consequently, students may absorb English usage through popular culture, social media, or informal peer interactions that do not model respectful discourse. This tendency risks normalizing impolite, overly casual, or contextually inappropriate language habits that are at odds with Indonesian cultural expectations of

respect, especially in school settings where teachers are regarded as figures of authority and moral guidance.

Parallel to this pedagogical gap is the missed opportunity to link language instruction with relevant and engaging thematic content that can ground abstract language structures in students' everyday realities and interests. The literature shows that Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approaches, which blend subject content with language instruction, have been widely adopted in Europe and other regions as effective strategies for contextualizing language use. However, the thematic integration of content that actively fosters polite interaction has been less explored. The theme of Sports and Health, for example, presents unique potential for bilingual contexts because it naturally involves structured communication, teamwork, and discussions that demand polite instructions, cooperation, and encouragement. While global studies (Nichols et al., 2020; Xie & Chu, 2023) show that combining English language teaching with sports education has improved students' motivation and participation, few works have systematically connected such integration with the explicit goal of cultivating *adab berbahasa*.

This study recognizes the dual benefits of thematic integration: engaging students in topics that are inherently dynamic and physical—such as sports and health—while providing authentic contexts for practicing respectful communication. Sports inherently demand clear instructions, respectful cooperation, and discipline, while discussions on health awareness nurture responsibility and care for oneself and others. By embedding language learning within these contexts, teachers can create natural opportunities for students to practice both English and Indonesian in ways that reflect real-life politeness conventions. Moreover, the global literature suggests that when learners see direct relevance between classroom activities and their daily lives, their intrinsic motivation and retention rates increase (Yoon, 2023).

In recent years, the COVID-19 pandemic further emphasized the need for health literacy among students. Integrating Sports and Health themes into bilingual teaching therefore responds not only to language goals but also to a broader educational mission: fostering well-rounded, health-conscious, and socially responsible individuals. International studies also underscore that education systems which interconnect subject content with character education are more effective in building learners' civic sense, empathy, and communication skills (Dominguez et al., 2023). Yet, despite the growing discourse on holistic education and character development, the intersection of these elements with bilingual language education remains underexplored, especially within the Indonesian school context.

This research thus fills a significant gap by proposing a bilingual teaching model that integrates the Sports and Health theme as a context for cultivating polite language use. It draws on interdisciplinary insights from bilingual education, thematic CLIL models, health education, and character building through sports pedagogy. The objective is not merely to test whether students' language proficiency improves but to investigate how thematic integration influences their awareness and practice of polite communication in both English and Indonesian. By doing so, the study aims to contribute to local and global discourse on how bilingual education can better fulfill its potential as a medium for holistic learner development.

- Another layer of significance is the innovative use of technology within this approach. The research aligns with global findings (Bosso & Pineda, 2023; Gierlinger & Keplinger, 2023; Liu et al., 2023) that digital platforms, interactive learning tools, and online collaboration can amplify students' exposure to real-life communication scenarios, offering diverse opportunities for practicing polite language in hybrid or blended learning environments. The use of digital media also responds to the increasing digitization of education in rural and semi-urban areas in Indonesia, where technology bridges gaps in resource availability and teacher support. Yet, despite technological advances, there is still scant empirical work that examines how digital tools can be strategically aligned with content themes like sports and health to build students' language etiquette in bilingual settings.

In summary, this research sets out to address multiple interconnected objectives. It investigates how the thematic integration of Sports and Health in bilingual teaching can practically enhance students' polite language use. It seeks to provide empirical evidence on how this integration impacts learners' ability to navigate both English and Indonesian contexts with respect and cultural sensitivity. It explores how digital tools can facilitate this approach effectively, especially in schools that may lack access to abundant print resources but can leverage mobile technology and internet-based learning. Finally, it aims to generate a replicable model that schools and policymakers can adapt to strengthen the character-building function of bilingual education programs.

By explicitly situating polite language use at the heart of bilingual teaching, framed through meaningful, engaging, and context-rich themes, this research aspires to reorient the conversation around what bilingual education should achieve in Indonesia and similar contexts. It invites educators, curriculum developers, and education leaders to rethink bilingual teaching not only as a linguistic task but as an opportunity to shape respectful, responsible, and communicative citizens prepared to thrive in diverse cultural landscapes.

Methods

This study employs a mixed-methods research design combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to ensure a comprehensive analysis of how integrating Sports and Health themes in bilingual education affects students' polite language use. The mixed-methods design is chosen for its capacity to capture both measurable improvements in language skills and nuanced insights into students' and teachers' experiences.

The research uses a quasi-experimental approach with a pre-test and post-test control group design. The experimental group receives bilingual instruction integrated with Sports and Health themes, while the control group follows a standard bilingual curriculum. The participants are students from MA Al Fithrah Semarang. The sample is selected purposively to represent rural and semi-urban educational contexts.

Data collection techniques include classroom observations to assess student interactions, structured interviews with teachers and students to capture perspectives, and questionnaires measuring attitudes toward polite language use. Pre-tests and post-tests evaluate linguistic performance and etiquette awareness before and after the intervention. Quantitative data are analyzed using paired t-tests and ANOVA to identify

▪statistically significant differences. Qualitative data are coded thematically to reveal patterns in communication behavior and contextual influences.

The rationale for this methodology stems from the need to validate the research model's effectiveness both statistically and contextually. Combining numerical data with narrative accounts enhances the study's validity and reliability by triangulating findings from multiple sources. This approach allows the study to contribute empirical evidence and practical recommendations for integrating character-building themes into bilingual education.

Results and Discussion

This section presents and interprets the findings of the study. The results are organized in subsections, each with a table that illustrates key data, followed by detailed explanations and discussions linking the outcomes to relevant literature and the research objectives. These findings provide evidence on how integrating Sports and Health themes in bilingual education influences students' language proficiency and polite language use.

1. Pre-Test and Post-Test Scores

The first set of findings compares the pre-test and post-test scores of the experimental and control groups to evaluate whether integrating the Sports and Health theme impacts students' bilingual language proficiency and polite language use.

Table 1. Comparison of Pre-Test and Post-Test Scores

Group	N	Mean Pre-Test	Mean Post-Test	Mean Difference	t-value	p-value
Experimental	30	65.2	82.5	17.3	5.87	0.0001
Control	30	64.7	70.3	5.6	1.42	0.162

The data show that students who received bilingual instruction with the integrated Sports and Health theme significantly improved their scores compared to those in the control group. The mean difference for the experimental group was 17.3 points, while the control group's mean difference was only 5.6 points. The t-test indicates a significant difference ($p < 0.05$) for the experimental group, suggesting the effectiveness of thematic integration.

These results demonstrate that embedding thematic content relevant to students' daily lives enhances their engagement and contextual understanding, translating into better language outcomes. This finding reinforces global research (Amerstorfer & Blanckenburg, 2023; Tran & Duong, 2024; Yildiz, 2023) which confirms that Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and other forms of content-based instruction can deepen learning by linking language skills with meaningful, relatable subject matter. When students see clear connections between what they learn in language lessons and their interests—in this case, sports activities and health awareness—they are more likely to participate actively and internalize new vocabulary and expressions. The significant score improvement suggests that the thematic approach not only makes language learning more enjoyable but also supports cognitive retention by providing a realistic context in which to apply new skills. The contrast with the control group, which showed only

- marginal gains, highlights the limitations of conventional bilingual teaching that lacks contextual grounding. This evidence supports the argument that a relevant, integrated curriculum can serve as a practical strategy to strengthen both language proficiency and the soft skills necessary for respectful communication in bilingual contexts.

2. Questionnaire Results on Polite Language Attitudes

To assess shifts in students' attitudes toward polite language use, a questionnaire was administered pre- and post-intervention.

Table 2. Changes in Students' Polite Language Attitudes

Statement	Mean Test	Pre- Test	Mean Test	Post- Test	Mean Change
I greet teachers politely	3.5		4.6		+1.1
I use polite words with peers	3.2		4.4		+1.2
I avoid slang in formal contexts	2.8		4.1		+1.3
I say thank you and sorry	3.7		4.8		+1.1

The results indicate a clear positive shift in students' self-reported politeness behaviors. Before the intervention, many students showed moderate awareness but lacked consistency in applying polite forms in school settings. After integrating the Sports and Health theme, students reported greater awareness and more frequent use of polite expressions. The highest gain (+1.3) appeared in the statement about avoiding slang, which shows that students began to differentiate between casual and formal contexts more consciously. This suggests that embedding polite speech practice in realistic classroom activities—like giving sports instructions or sharing health advice—can help internalize etiquette norms more deeply. These improvements align with global findings on context-based language instruction, highlighting that thematic relevance fosters not only motivation but also practical application of language values (De Saint Preux & Blanco, 2021; Smith & Humphries, 2017; Zhou, 2023). The changes also imply that character-focused bilingual teaching can shift not only how students speak but also how they think about respectful communication in different settings, laying a stronger foundation for lifelong polite language use.

3. Classroom Interaction Observations

Observations in this study were designed to capture the real life application of polite language during classroom activities, allowing researchers to see how students naturally used greetings, polite instructions, apologies, and expressions of gratitude within authentic bilingual contexts. By closely monitoring these daily interactions, the study provides evidence that polite language is not just taught but practiced in meaningful ways when students are engaged with relevant themes like sports and health. This direct observation complements test scores and questionnaires by offering a clear picture of how respectful language behavior unfolds in actual teaching and learning situations.

▪ *Table 3. Frequency of Polite Expressions During Class Activities*

Type of Expression	Experimental Group	Control Group
Greetings	50	20
Polite instructions	65	22
Apologies	40	15
Thanks	55	18

The table shows that students in the experimental group used polite expressions more frequently than those in the control group. This demonstrates that when Sports and Health themes were embedded into lessons, students naturally engaged in respectful discourse, confirming that context driven language learning strengthens polite language use by providing real life situations to apply respectful speech. This finding reinforces insights from Shen et al. (2024), who argue that context rich learning creates authentic scenarios for practicing character values, making language etiquette feel purposeful rather than forced. In contrast, the control group showed limited evidence of spontaneous polite expression, highlighting the gap in conventional teaching.

4. Teachers' Perspectives on Implementation

Teachers were interviewed to understand how feasible and impactful they found the integrated model.

Table 4. Summary of Teachers' Feedback with Percentage

Theme	Positive Feedback (%)	Challenges (%)
Student Engagement	85% reported higher motivation and participation	40% noted the need for more varied materials
Language Outcomes	90% observed improved fluency and etiquette	50% needed extra time for lesson planning
Sustainability	80% agreed it builds character	60% stressed the need for more training

Teachers confirmed that combining Sports and Health themes with bilingual instruction made lessons more dynamic and meaningful. They noted that students became more disciplined, cooperative, and respectful, showing clear behavioral improvements that extended beyond language proficiency alone. Teachers observed that students applied polite expressions more naturally during group activities and sports-based tasks, demonstrating that thematic contexts offer authentic situations for using courteous language. However, they also highlighted practical challenges that could limit sustainability if not addressed adequately. Many teachers emphasized the urgent need for high-quality supporting materials, such as lesson plans, bilingual glossaries, and interactive resources that align with both sports and health content and language objectives. They stressed that without accessible materials, teachers would spend excessive time preparing lessons, reducing the model's practicality for daily teaching. Additionally, teachers called for structured professional development to build their capacity to design and deliver integrated lessons confidently. This aligns with global calls

- (Andrey, 2021; Liddelow et al., 2023) (Andrey, 2021; Liddelow et al., 2023) for comprehensive teacher training and collaborative resource development to maximize the benefits of CLIL and similar thematic approaches. By investing in training and materials, schools can ensure that integrated bilingual teaching is not a one-off innovation but a sustainable practice that consistently supports students' polite language development and holistic character growth.

Discussion

The results affirm that thematic integration has measurable effects on students' language skills and attitudes. The significant improvement in post-test scores demonstrates that contextualized bilingual instruction enhances both proficiency and etiquette. Attitude shifts and observed behaviors confirm that respectful communication can be nurtured through purposeful design, not left to chance.

Globally, bilingual programs that ignore sociocultural and pragmatic dimensions risk producing technically competent students who struggle with appropriate language use (López Sánchez et al., 2018; Shmatko, 2023). This study's findings help bridge that gap by demonstrating a practical, adaptable approach. They echo findings from studies on English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and CLIL that link language teaching with relevant contexts to boost engagement and learning retention.

Teacher feedback also highlights implementation realities. While thematic integration enriches lessons, it demands well-prepared materials and teacher capacity-building—common themes in global bilingual education challenges. Digital tools can help, as suggested by Azzouzi (2024), but local contexts must be factored in to ensure equitable access.

Altogether, these results suggest that embedding character values within bilingual curricula through relatable themes like sports and health is not only feasible but highly impactful for student outcomes in rural and underserved schools. The approach can be replicated in other contexts, with appropriate adaptation to local culture, resources, and student needs. Future research could expand on this by testing other themes and measuring long-term impacts on students' civic and linguistic competence.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how integrating Sports and Health themes into bilingual education can strengthen students' polite language use and overall communication skills. The findings provide clear evidence that contextual, thematic bilingual instruction does not merely enhance linguistic competence but also plays a vital role in shaping students' awareness and practice of respectful, appropriate language behavior. The significant improvements in students' test scores, their more positive attitudes toward polite language use, and the higher frequency of polite expressions observed during classroom interactions all demonstrate that embedding meaningful, real-life contexts like sports and health into language teaching can bridge the gap between technical language skills and social-pragmatic competence.

The teacher feedback confirms the model's practical feasibility and its value for character education, while also highlighting the critical need for adequate teaching materials, professional development, and institutional support to ensure sustainability.

▪These findings echo global research that advocates for context-rich, integrated models such as CLIL and ESP to make language learning more engaging and relevant. More importantly, they contribute new insights to bilingual education in rural and underserved areas where resources may be limited but where thematic, integrated approaches can leverage students' existing interests and real-life experiences.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that bilingual education programs should move beyond rote learning of vocabulary and grammar to embrace content that cultivates not only language proficiency but also students' values, politeness, and intercultural awareness. By strategically integrating Sports and Health themes, teachers can create authentic, motivating spaces where students naturally practice respectful language use in both Indonesian and English. The success of this model suggests it can be replicated and adapted to other themes and contexts to strengthen the character-building function of bilingual education. Future research should build on these findings by exploring long-term impacts, experimenting with other relevant themes, and scaling up implementation through teacher training and digital resource development.

By contributing a practical, adaptable model that blends language, content, and character education, this study supports a vision of bilingual teaching that truly prepares students to communicate respectfully, responsibly, and confidently in an increasingly interconnected world.

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