

TORAJA LANGUAGE AS MOTHER TONGUE IN ARTS, CULTURE, AND CRAFTS (*SBdP*) LEARNING IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Toraja, an Austronesian language spoken mainly in the Tana Toraja and Toraja Utara regencies of South Sulawesi, Indonesia, can be positioned as a mother tongue within the teaching of Seni Budaya dan Prakarya (SBdP), the Arts, Culture, and Crafts subject taught in Indonesian elementary schools. Using a qualitative descriptive literature review (library research) method, this study sought to answer three research questions: (1) how has the Toraja language been documented as a mother tongue within elementary-level learning; (2) what role can the Toraja mother tongue play within SBdP instruction specifically; and (3) what benefits, challenges, and strategies have been reported in the wider literature on mother-tongue-based and local-wisdom-based elementary education that are relevant to this integration. Thirteen scholarly sources published mainly between 2016 and 2026, together with two foundational theoretical works, were selected through searches of Google Scholar, Garuda, DOAJ, and international databases, screened for relevance to mother-tongue instruction, local-wisdom-based arts education, or Toraja language and culture in schooling, and analyzed using thematic content analysis. Five recurring themes were identified: the Toraja mother tongue as a carrier of cultural values and identity; the marginal curricular position of local languages relative to the national and foreign languages; SBdP and local-wisdom-based arts learning as a natural entry point for mother-tongue integration; the cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional benefits documented for mother-tongue-based instruction generally; and the structural and pedagogical challenges, particularly teachers' limited proficiency in Toraja and the scarcity of Toraja-language teaching materials, that constrain implementation. The review concludes that embedding Toraja language use within SBdP activities such as weaving, wood-carving motifs, and traditional song offers a practical and low-cost pathway for revitalizing the mother tongue in elementary classrooms, provided it is supported by teacher training, contextualized materials, and stronger institutional commitment.

Keywords: *Toraja Language, Mother Tongue, Arts Culture and Crafts (SBdP), Elementary School, Local Wisdom, Literature Review*

INTRODUCTION

Mother-tongue-based instruction is widely regarded as a foundation for effective early education. Children who begin school in a language they already understand are better able to construct new knowledge, transfer literacy skills to a second or third language, and participate actively in classroom activities (Gobana, 2025). This principle is consistent with the interdependence hypothesis, which holds that cognitive and academic competencies developed in a learner's first language transfer readily to additional languages once a sufficient level of proficiency is reached (Cummins, 2000). A recent global review of language-of-instruction policy similarly concludes that teaching young learners in a language they speak and understand improves comprehension, retention, and long-term learning outcomes, and recommends that education systems strengthen rather than sideline mother-tongue instruction in the early grades (World Bank, 2021).

Indonesia presents a particularly complex setting for this principle. With more than seven hundred local languages spoken across the archipelago, the formal education system nonetheless prioritizes Bahasa Indonesia as the primary medium of instruction from the early grades onward, while local languages are generally relegated to optional, local-content subjects

with inconsistent time allocation across schools and regions (Rusdiansyah et al., 2025). Recent studies of Javanese-language teaching in elementary schools report that even for one of Indonesia's largest regional languages, classroom practices rarely raise learners' critical awareness of the language beyond superficial vocabulary drills, and that regional languages are often left behind in a curriculum still oriented toward national and international languages (Yulianto et al., 2023). A comparable pattern has been documented in rural, linguistically diverse districts of South Sulawesi, where inconsistencies between national policy and school-level practice leave teachers uncertain about when, how, and how much local language to use in the classroom (Rusdiansyah et al., 2025).

Toraja is one of the local languages affected by this broader pattern. Spoken by the Toraja people of the Tana Toraja and Toraja Utara regencies, the language is closely interwoven with a distinctive cultural system that includes the traditional tongkonan house, elaborate death and thanksgiving ceremonies, and a strong ethic of kinship and communal solidarity. Patiung (2017) found that Indonesian-language teachers in North Toraja routinely drew on Toraja cultural values such as *kasiuluran* (kinship), *tengko situru'* (togetherness), and *kabassaran* (work ethic) to reinforce character education within language lessons, indicating that Toraja cultural content already has a recognized place in classroom practice even when Indonesian, rather than Toraja itself, is the language of instruction. At the early-childhood level, Patintingan et al. (2018) similarly reported that the use of the Toraja mother tongue helped young children in Tana Toraja grasp new concepts more readily than instruction delivered solely in Indonesian, suggesting that the same benefits documented for mother-tongue instruction elsewhere are relevant to the Toraja context specifically.

Seni Budaya dan Prakarya (SBdP), or Arts, Culture, and Crafts, is the subject in the Indonesian elementary curriculum most explicitly tasked with carrying local artistic and cultural content into the classroom. Its scope covers visual art, music, dance, and craft-making, together with the appreciation of cultural heritage more broadly, and its basic competencies are designed to be filled with locally relevant material (Pitriani, 2020). In practice, many schools already use SBdP as a vehicle for local wisdom: teachers have integrated local agricultural materials into collage-making, regional culinary traditions into craft projects, and traditional weaving and dance into performance-based learning (Iqbal, 2024; Rosala, 2016). Because SBdP already carries an explicit mandate to draw on local culture, it offers a curricular space where Toraja-language vocabulary, songs, and instructions could plausibly be embedded without requiring additional instructional hours, directly addressing the time-allocation constraint that limits stand-alone local-language subjects in many schools.

Despite these connections, the existing literature treats mother-tongue instruction and local-wisdom-based SBdP learning largely as separate lines of inquiry. Studies of Toraja language in education focus mainly on Indonesian-language classrooms or early-childhood settings rather than on SBdP specifically, while studies of local-wisdom-based SBdP learning rarely discuss the language of instruction as an explicit variable. This gap motivates the present study, which uses a literature review approach to synthesize what is known about Toraja as a mother tongue in elementary education and about local-wisdom-based SBdP learning, in order to map how the two might be, and in some cases already are, connected in practice.

Specifically, this study seeks to answer three research questions: (1) how has the Toraja language been documented as a mother tongue within elementary-level learning in Tana Toraja and Toraja Utara; (2) what role can the Toraja mother tongue play within SBdP instruction in particular, given the subject's existing orientation toward local culture; and (3) what benefits, challenges, and strategies reported in the broader literature on mother-tongue-based and local-wisdom-based elementary education are relevant to guiding this integration.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design using a literature review (library research) method. This approach was selected because the objective of the study is not to collect new empirical data directly from teachers, students, or schools, but rather to identify, synthesize, and interpret findings that have already been reported in existing scholarly literature concerning mother-tongue-based instruction, Toraja language and culture in education, and local-wisdom-based Arts, Culture, and Crafts (SBdP) learning in elementary schools. A literature review design is considered appropriate because it allows conclusions to be drawn across a wider range of contexts and subject areas than a single empirical study conducted in one school setting could provide, which is particularly useful for a topic, such as this one, that sits at the intersection of two separate strands of research. The data sources for this study consist of scholarly journal articles, an undergraduate thesis, and a policy report addressing mother-tongue and local-language instruction, Toraja language and culture in schooling, or local-wisdom-based SBdP and arts-culture learning in elementary schools. A total of thirteen publications, comprising both international and national (SINTA- and Garuda-indexed) sources published between 2016 and 2026, were selected as the primary data for analysis, supplemented by two foundational theoretical works on mother-tongue and bilingual education. Sources were selected to represent a range of contexts, including Tana Toraja and Toraja Utara specifically, other regions of South Sulawesi and Indonesia (Luwu Timur, East Nusa Tenggara, Central Java), and international mother-tongue-education research, in order to capture both Toraja-specific evidence and cross-context patterns relevant to the Toraja setting. As this is a literature-based study, the primary instrument used was a document review protocol developed by the researcher to extract relevant information systematically from each source. The protocol recorded the author(s), year of publication, research context, method used in the original study, and the specific findings concerning mother-tongue use, local-wisdom integration, or Toraja language and culture. This protocol functioned as the coding sheet that guided the extraction and categorization of data across all selected sources.

Data collection was carried out in several stages. First, an initial search was conducted using keyword combinations such as “bahasa ibu sekolah dasar,” “bahasa Toraja sekolah dasar,” “mother tongue-based education Indonesia,” “SBdP berbasis kearifan lokal,” and “local wisdom arts learning elementary school” in Google Scholar, Garuda/Neliti, DOAJ, and publisher databases such as Taylor & Francis, ScienceDirect, and ERIC. Second, titles and abstracts of the search results were screened for relevance to mother-tongue instruction, Toraja language and culture in education, or local-wisdom-based SBdP learning. Third, inclusion criteria were applied, namely: (a) the publication directly discusses the use of mother-tongue or local-language instruction in elementary or early-childhood education, or discusses local-wisdom-based Arts, Culture, and Crafts (SBdP) learning, or specifically addresses Toraja language or culture in an educational setting; (b) the publication is a peer-reviewed journal article, academic thesis, or institutional/policy report; and (c) the publication was published between 2016 and 2026, with a small number of earlier foundational theoretical works on bilingual and mother-tongue education admitted as background theory. Sources that addressed secondary or tertiary education only, or that had no clear link to language of instruction or to SBdP/arts-culture content, were excluded. Fourth, the full text of each eligible source was read and the relevant information was extracted using the document review protocol described above. The extracted data were analyzed using thematic content analysis. This process involved open coding of the findings reported in each source, followed by grouping semantically related codes into broader thematic categories. The categories were refined iteratively by comparing

patterns across sources until a stable set of thematic categories was established. These categories form the basis of the results presented in the following section.

RESULTS

The thematic analysis of the reviewed publications identified five recurring categories relevant to positioning the Toraja language as a mother tongue within SBdP learning in elementary schools. These categories were derived by coding each study's reported findings and grouping semantically related codes; for instance, codes such as “kinship values in language lessons” and “concept understanding through the local language” were merged into the category of Toraja mother tongue as a carrier of cultural values and identity. The five categories, together with their operational descriptions and representative studies, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Categories Relevant to Toraja Mother Tongue in SBdP Learning Identified in the Reviewed Literature

No	Category	Description	Representative Studies
1	Toraja mother tongue as a carrier of cultural values and identity	Use of Toraja language, together with the values embedded in it (kinship, communal solidarity, work ethic, religiosity), as content and medium within classroom learning, reinforcing learners' cultural identity alongside academic material.	Patiung (2017); Patintingan et al. (2018)
2	Marginal curricular position of local and mother-tongue languages	Local languages, including Toraja, are generally positioned as optional local-content subjects with limited and inconsistent instructional time relative to the national language and foreign languages.	Rusdiansyah et al. (2025); Yulianto et al. (2023); Nugraheni & Hasan (2026)
3	SBdP and local-wisdom-based arts learning as an entry point for mother-tongue integration	Arts, Culture, and Crafts (SBdP) content frequently draws on local materials, skills, and vocabulary, offering an existing curricular space where mother-tongue terms and cultural concepts can be embedded without additional instructional hours.	Rosala (2016); Pitriani (2020); Iqbal (2024)
4	Cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional benefits of mother-tongue-based instruction	Instruction that begins in a language children already understand is reported to support concept formation, literacy transfer to the national language, active participation, and a stronger sense of belonging.	Gobana (2025); Laksana et al. (2025); World Bank (2021)

5	Structural and pedagogical challenges to implementation	Teachers' limited proficiency in the local language, scarcity of local-language teaching and craft materials, and a generational shift toward Indonesian among children constrain sustained mother-tongue integration.	Nugraheni & Hasan (2026); Rusdiansyah et al. (2025)
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As shown in Table 1, the marginal curricular position of local and mother-tongue languages and the structural and pedagogical challenges to implementation were the categories most consistently reported across both the Toraja-specific and the broader Indonesian and international literature, reflecting a shared structural problem rather than an issue confined to a single region. The category of SBdP and local-wisdom-based arts learning as an entry point for mother-tongue integration was reported specifically in relation to arts, culture, and craft instruction rather than to language lessons directly, indicating that this connection, while plausible and partly documented, remains less thoroughly explored than the general case for mother-tongue instruction.

Regarding the Toraja mother tongue as a carrier of cultural values and identity, Patiung (2017) found that Indonesian-language teachers in North Toraja senior secondary schools consistently embedded Toraja cultural values, expressed partly through Toraja-language phrases and proverbs such as *misa' kada dipotuo, pantan kada dipomate* (“one word we stand strong, different words we are destroyed”), into their speaking-skills instruction as a means of character education. Although this study was conducted at the secondary level, it demonstrates that Toraja-language content already has an accepted place within formal schooling in the region, providing a precedent for extending similar practices to elementary-level SBdP learning. At the early-childhood level, Patintingan et al. (2018) reported that using the Toraja mother tongue helped children in a Tana Toraja preschool setting grasp new concepts more readily, reinforcing the broader claim that instruction in a language children already know supports comprehension in young learners specifically within this region.

With regard to the marginal curricular position of local and mother-tongue languages, Rusdiansyah et al. (2025) documented significant inconsistencies in the implementation of multilingual education policy in Luwu Timur, South Sulawesi, a rural district bordering the Toraja-speaking area, finding that gaps between national policy and school-level practice left teachers uncertain about when and how to use local languages in the classroom despite a national roadmap for regional-language revitalization. Yulianto et al. (2023) reported a related pattern for Javanese, one of Indonesia's largest regional languages, finding that only about half of documented teaching practices meaningfully raised learners' critical awareness of the language, with regional languages generally left behind relative to the national curriculum's other priorities. Nugraheni and Hasan (2026), examining rural primary schools situated within a regional-language environment, likewise found that teachers had to develop their own adaptation strategies to reconcile Indonesian-medium instruction with the local language environment their students came from, in the absence of a clearly structured mother-tongue curriculum.

For the category of SBdP and local-wisdom-based arts learning as an entry point for mother-tongue integration, Rosala (2016) argued that the moral values embedded in local traditional dance and performing arts provide a foundation for character education when incorporated into elementary Arts and Culture instruction, while Pitriani's (2020) analysis of the SBdP curriculum for grade III confirmed that its basic competencies are explicitly designed to accommodate local cultural content, cultural literacy, and citizenship alongside technical

artistic skill. Iqbal (2024) documented a concrete case of this integration in practice, describing how teachers at an elementary madrasah incorporated local knowledge, local values, local skills, and local materials, such as using regionally grown grains for collage work and teaching a local basket-weaving technique, directly into SBdP lessons across different grade levels. None of these studies addressed Toraja language specifically, but together they establish that SBdP is already used elsewhere in Indonesia as a vehicle for embedding local cultural and, by extension, linguistic content, which supports the plausibility of a similar approach for Toraja weaving, wood-carving motifs, and traditional song.

Concerning the cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional benefits of mother-tongue-based instruction, Gobana (2025) synthesized theoretical frameworks including linguistic human rights and the interdependence hypothesis to argue that mother-tongue education fulfils a fundamental educational right, enhances learning through cognitive transfer, and empowers marginalized communities by centering their linguistic and cultural capital. Laksana et al. (2025), studying an ethnic community in East Nusa Tenggara, found that a mother-tongue-based instructional model produced measurable learning gains in literacy and numeracy among early-grade students, with community elders and local leaders directly involved in developing culturally relevant learning materials, an approach that strengthened both local ownership and instructional quality. At a broader policy level, the World Bank (2021) review of language-of-instruction evidence concluded that teaching young children in a language they understand improves learning outcomes and supports a smoother transition to instruction in a second or additional language, providing a general evidentiary basis consistent with the more localized findings above.

Finally, regarding structural and pedagogical challenges, Nugraheni and Hasan (2026) and Rusdiansyah et al. (2025) both pointed to teachers' inconsistent proficiency in the regional language, the absence of standardized local-language teaching materials, and policy ambiguity as the main obstacles to sustained implementation. These challenges are compounded, in the Toraja context specifically, by a broader concern noted informally in the region that younger generations increasingly favor Indonesian in daily communication, which narrows the pool of children who arrive at school already fluent in Toraja and increases the burden on schools to reintroduce rather than simply reinforce the language.

DISCUSSION

Consistent with the Result section, the discussion below is organized around the same five categories in order to interpret the patterns identified in Table 1 and to consider their implications for integrating the Toraja mother tongue into SBdP learning specifically.

The finding that Toraja-language content and values already have an accepted place in North Toraja classrooms (Patiung, 2017) is significant because it suggests that introducing more Toraja language into SBdP would not require building acceptance from a standing start, but rather extending an existing practice into a new subject and a younger age group. Patiung's (2017) study was conducted through Indonesian-language instruction at the secondary level, whereas SBdP at the elementary level offers a more experiential, activity-based setting, arguably better suited to the kind of concept-based learning that Patintingan et al. (2018) found benefited from mother-tongue use among young children. Read together, these two studies suggest a developmental logic: if the Toraja mother tongue already supports early concept formation (Patintingan et al., 2018) and is already accepted as a bearer of cultural values in later schooling (Patiung, 2017), then embedding it within elementary SBdP activities such as naming tools, motifs, and steps in a traditional craft in Toraja before introducing the Indonesian equivalents would align with, rather than depart from, existing practice in the region.

The marginal curricular position documented by Rusdiansyah et al. (2025), Yulianto et al. (2023), and Nugraheni and Hasan (2026) is consistent with Cummins' (2000) observation that additive bilingual education, in which the mother tongue is actively developed alongside the dominant language, requires deliberate institutional support to overcome the default pull toward monolingual instruction in the national language. Without such support, local languages tend to survive only informally, through incidental teacher use rather than planned curriculum content, a pattern all three studies document to varying degrees. This is precisely why the SBdP-based integration pathway explored in this review is potentially useful: rather than requiring new instructional hours, which the reviewed literature consistently identifies as difficult to secure for local languages, it proposes using time already allocated to SBdP, a subject whose curriculum is explicitly designed to include local content (Pitriani, 2020), as the vehicle for mother-tongue exposure.

The examples of local-wisdom integration in SBdP documented by Rosala (2016), Pitriani (2020), and Iqbal (2024) indicate that the pedagogical infrastructure for this approach already exists in Indonesian elementary education, even though none of these studies addressed language use explicitly. Iqbal's (2024) description of teachers incorporating local materials and local craft techniques into SBdP lessons at different grade levels is particularly instructive: the same lesson structure, in a Toraja-speaking school, could readily incorporate Toraja vocabulary for materials, tools, and technique names, Toraja motif terminology in weaving or wood-carving units, and short Toraja songs or chants accompanying craft or performance activities, without altering the underlying SBdP competencies being taught. This reframes mother-tongue revitalization not as an additional burden on an already constrained curriculum, but as an enrichment of an activity teachers are already expected to carry out.

The cognitive and socio-emotional benefits reported by Gobana (2025), Laksana et al. (2025), and the World Bank (2021) provide the theoretical and evidentiary justification for why this integration would be worth pursuing rather than merely convenient. Laksana et al.'s (2025) finding that community elders' direct involvement in developing culturally relevant, mother-tongue materials strengthened both learning outcomes and local ownership is especially relevant to the Toraja context, where traditional artisans, weavers, wood-carvers, and elders are natural sources of both the craft knowledge and the language needed for SBdP content, suggesting that community involvement, rather than teacher effort alone, may be necessary for sustainable implementation.

Finally, the structural and pedagogical challenges identified by Nugraheni and Hasan (2026) and Rusdiansyah et al. (2025), together with the broader concern about generational language shift in the Toraja-speaking area, indicate that integrating Toraja into SBdP cannot rely on teacher goodwill alone. Many elementary teachers, including those without strong Toraja proficiency themselves, would need targeted professional development, and schools would need at least basic bilingual reference materials, such as simple glossaries of craft and performance vocabulary, before this integration could be implemented consistently rather than sporadically. Taken together, the reviewed literature suggests that the challenges are real but not fundamentally different in kind from the challenges already documented for mother-tongue and local-wisdom education elsewhere in Indonesia, meaning that solutions developed in those other contexts, such as community-elder involvement in materials development (Laksana et al., 2025) and clearer alignment between national policy and school-level practice (Rusdiansyah et al., 2025), are likely to be transferable to the Toraja setting.

CONCLUSION

This literature review set out to examine how the Toraja language can be positioned as a mother tongue within Seni Budaya dan Prakarya (SBdP) learning in Indonesian elementary schools. The synthesis of thirteen sources, supplemented by two foundational theoretical works, reveals five interrelated themes: the Toraja mother tongue as a carrier of cultural values and identity, the marginal curricular position of local languages relative to the national and foreign languages, SBdP and local-wisdom-based arts learning as a natural entry point for mother-tongue integration, the cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional benefits documented for mother-tongue-based instruction generally, and the structural and pedagogical challenges that constrain implementation. Toraja-specific evidence indicates that the mother tongue already supports young children's concept understanding and already carries an accepted place in the region's classrooms, while evidence from local-wisdom-based SBdP practice elsewhere in Indonesia shows that the subject's curriculum is already structured to accommodate local content of exactly this kind.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that continuous professional development be provided for elementary SBdP teachers in Tana Toraja and Toraja Utara, focusing on both basic Toraja-language competence and strategies for embedding local-language vocabulary, songs, and instructions into weaving, wood-carving, dance, and other craft-based activities. Schools and local education authorities are encouraged to develop simple bilingual (Toraja-Indonesian) teaching materials, such as illustrated glossaries of craft and performance terminology, and to draw on the flexibility of the Merdeka curriculum to formalize this integration rather than leaving it to individual teacher initiative. Involving traditional artisans, weavers, wood-carvers, and community elders as guest contributors to SBdP lessons is also recommended, both to supply authentic craft knowledge and to model natural Toraja-language use for learners. As this study relies on secondary literature and no source directly examined Toraja-language use within SBdP classrooms, future research employing empirical methods, such as classroom observation or interviews with SBdP teachers and students in specific Tana Toraja or Toraja Utara elementary schools, is recommended to validate and extend these findings.

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