

## PRESERVING RIAU MALAY ALLUSIONS: A LINGUISTIC APPROACH TO CHARACTER EDUCATION

Silvia Marni <sup>1)</sup> Piki Setri Pernantah <sup>2)</sup> Hermendra <sup>3)</sup> Sakilah <sup>4)</sup> Wahyudi Rahmat <sup>5)</sup>, Refa Lina Tiawati R<sup>6)</sup>

<sup>1,5,6</sup>Universitas PGRI Sumatera Barat, Padang, West Sumatera, Indonesia

<sup>2,3</sup>Universitas Riau, Pekanbaru, Indonesia

<sup>4</sup>Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Syarif Kasim Riau, Pekanbaru, Indonesia

<sup>1</sup>Email: marnisilvia85@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup>Email: piki.setri@lecturer.unri.ac.id

<sup>3</sup>Email: hermandra@lecturer.unri.ac.id

<sup>4</sup>Email: sakilah@uin-suska.ac.id

<sup>5</sup>Email: wahyudirahmat24@gmail.com

<sup>6</sup>Email: refalinatiawati27@gmail.com

### Abstrak

Bahasa Melayu Riau merupakan bagian penting dari warisan lisan Indonesia, yang mencerminkan identitas sosial budaya masyarakat Melayu Riau. Dalam interaksi sehari-hari, masyarakat Melayu Riau sering menggunakan bahasa kiasan sebagai sarana kesopanan dan sebagai cerminan nilai-nilai budaya. Ungkapan-ungkapan linguistik ini memfasilitasi komunikasi yang penuh rasa hormat dan berfungsi sebagai alat untuk pendidikan karakter. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mendefinisikan kembali peran ungkapan-ungkapan kiasan Melayu Riau sebagai lebih dari sekadar alat linguistik, tetapi sebagai komponen mendasar dari kesopanan dan komunikasi etis. Selain itu, penelitian ini meneliti bagaimana tradisi-tradisi linguistik ini dapat dilestarikan dan diintegrasikan ke dalam pendidikan tinggi untuk menumbuhkan pengembangan karakter, khususnya dalam menanamkan nilai-nilai seperti integritas, empati, dan rasa hormat di kalangan mahasiswa. Pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif digunakan untuk menganalisis ungkapan-ungkapan kiasan dalam bahasa Melayu Riau. Pengumpulan data meliputi dokumentasi ungkapan-ungkapan linguistik tradisional dan wawancara dengan para pakar budaya dan pendidik. Analisis difokuskan pada peran kiasan dalam interaksi sosial dan kontribusinya dalam membentuk perilaku etis. Temuan penelitian mengungkapkan bahwa kiasan Melayu Riau tertanam kuat dalam komunikasi budaya, berfungsi sebagai penanda kesopanan dan pembawa nilai-nilai moral dan etika. Ungkapan-ungkapan ini mencerminkan nilai-nilai seperti kerendahan hati, rasa hormat, dan keharmonisan sosial, yang memperkuat sifat-sifat karakter positif di antara para penuturnya. Memasukkan bahasa kiasan Melayu Riau ke dalam pendidikan tinggi telah menunjukkan potensi dalam memperkuat identitas budaya dan perilaku etis siswa. Wawancara dengan para pendidik mengungkapkan bahwa siswa yang terlibat dengan tradisi linguistik Melayu mengembangkan apresiasi yang lebih dalam terhadap kearifan lokal dan meningkatkan keterampilan komunikasi interpersonal mereka. Studi ini menggarisbawahi pentingnya melestarikan dan mempromosikan kiasan Melayu Riau sebagai sarana untuk membina pendidikan karakter di lembaga pendidikan tinggi. Dengan mengintegrasikan ungkapan-ungkapan ini ke dalam wacana akademis, universitas berkontribusi pada pelestarian warisan budaya sambil menanamkan nilai-nilai etika pada siswa. Penelitian di masa mendatang harus mengeksplorasi dampak jangka panjang dari program linguistik terstruktur pada perkembangan moral dan mengidentifikasi cara-cara lebih lanjut untuk mengintegrasikan kearifan linguistik tradisional ke dalam kerangka pendidikan modern.

**Kata kunci:** pendidikan karakter, warisan budaya, komunikasi etis, bahasa kiasan, Melayu Riau

### Abstract

Riau Malay is a vital part of Indonesia's oral heritage, reflecting the socio-cultural identity of the Riau Malay community. In everyday interactions, Riau Malays frequently use allusive language as a means of politeness and as a reflection of cultural values. These linguistic expressions facilitate respectful communication and serve as a tool for character education. This study aims to redefine the role of Riau Malay figurative expressions as more than just linguistic tools, but as fundamental components of politeness and ethical communication. Additionally, it examines

how these linguistic traditions can be preserved and integrated into higher education to foster character development, particularly in instilling values such as integrity, empathy, and respect among university students. A qualitative descriptive approach was used to analyze figurative expressions in Riau Malay. Data collection included documentation of traditional linguistic expressions and interviews with cultural experts and educators. The analysis focused on the role of allusions in social interactions and their contribution to shaping ethical behavior. Findings reveal that Riau Malay allusions are deeply embedded in cultural communication, serving as markers of politeness and carriers of moral and ethical values. These expressions reflect virtues such as humility, respect, and social harmony, reinforcing positive character traits among speakers. Incorporating Riau Malay figurative language into higher education has shown potential in strengthening students' cultural identity and ethical behavior. Interviews with educators revealed that students who engage with Malay linguistic traditions develop a deeper appreciation for local wisdom and improve their interpersonal communication skills. This study underscores the importance of preserving and promoting Riau Malay allusions as a means of fostering character education in higher learning institutions. By integrating these expressions into academic discourse, universities contribute to cultural heritage preservation while instilling ethical values in students. Future research should explore the long-term impact of structured linguistic programs on moral development and identify further ways to integrate traditional linguistic wisdom into modern educational frameworks.

**Keywords:** *character education, cultural heritage, ethical communication, figurative language, Riau Malay*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Riau Malay culture is rich in oral traditions, written expressions, and tangible artifacts. These cultural elements play a crucial role in society, serving as fundamental components that support daily life and social interactions within the Riau Malay community. Koentjaraningrat identifies seven key cultural elements (Sukinah, 2020), one of which is language—an essential medium that facilitates communication and interaction among individuals. Among the many aspects of Riau Malay cultural heritage, language holds particular significance as it serves as a primary means of communication. Language enables individuals to fulfill their social needs, interact, and engage with others (Kumar et al., 2018; Nani, 2024).

Language, as an integral part of cultural identity, functions as both an expressive tool and a means of preserving cultural heritage. It plays a vital role in distinguishing cultural groups based on linguistic characteristics. Moreover, valuing language as a crucial component of cultural heritage is essential for safeguarding Indonesia's diverse cultural landscape. As a multicultural nation, Indonesia is built upon the contributions of various ethnic and cultural communities. Culture, being a universal phenomenon, exists in

all societies, albeit with distinct variations across different groups (Diener et al., 2013; Varnum et al., 2017).

In the context of Riau Malay culture, language is not merely a communication tool; it embodies deeper meanings and symbolic representations. One of the defining characteristics of the Malay people is their linguistic politeness and refined manners, which reflect their social values and cultural identity (Hussain et al., 2020; Mansor et al., 2018). Within Riau Malay customs and traditions, the use of language is classified into three levels: *bahasa Melayu mendaki* (elevated Malay), *bahasa Melayu mendatar* (neutral Malay), and *bahasa Melayu menurun* (lower Malay). These classifications illustrate the community's strong emphasis on etiquette and the expression of politeness in social interactions. Such linguistic distinctions should be widely understood by all members of the Riau Malay community, particularly university students, as they are the next generation responsible for preserving and upholding their cultural heritage.

Furthermore, the use of language in Riau Malay tradition is encapsulated in *Tunjuk Ajar Melayu*, which provides guidance on proper speech etiquette through a traditional proverb:

*Yang disebut adat berbahasa:  
tahu alur dengan patutnya*

*tahu memilih kata mendaki  
tahu memakai kata mendatar  
tahu menyimak kata menurun  
supaya aib tidak bersimbah  
supaya malu tidak terdedah  
apa tanda orang berbangsa  
bercakap tahu berbudi bahasa  
berkata arif dalam berbahasa  
bertutur bijak berkata-kata.*

Translation:

Linguistic etiquette is characterized by:  
understanding the appropriate flow of speech,  
knowing when to use elevated language,  
knowing when to use neutral language,  
knowing when to use lower language,  
so that disgrace is not exposed,  
so that shame remains concealed.

What marks a person of noble character?

Speaking with courtesy and respect,  
choosing words wisely in communication,  
expressing thoughts with wisdom and  
prudence (Effendy, 2010).

This proverb serves as a guiding principle for the appropriate use of the Riau Malay language in society, emphasizing the importance of linguistic etiquette and the use of figurative speech to maintain respect and avoid causing offense. The emphasis on politeness in Riau Malay language reflects not only cultural identity but also character education, particularly for university students, who are expected to communicate in a manner that aligns with these cultural norms. Character education in higher education institutions is essential for shaping students holistically (Gamage et al., 2021; González-Pérez et al., 2022).

In Riau, this process is reinforced through the mandatory of Malay Culture Course in universities, particularly at Universitas Riau. This course aims to cultivate students who are not only academically proficient but also possess strong moral character. It is widely believed that

university students' character can be nurtured and developed gradually through educational processes (Moraes et al., 2023; Pranjić et al., 2021).

This educational approach fosters essential character values such as politeness, empathy, responsibility, and tolerance. Additionally, the figurative and courteous nature of the Riau Malay language serves as an important instrument in shaping students' character through meaningful and respectful communication. Thus, this study highlights the significance of language as a marker of cultural identity, an expression of politeness, and a tool for character development. As future intellectuals, students will play a crucial role in nation-building, particularly in preserving cultural heritage, which remains an essential aspect of national development.

## 2. LITERATUR REVIEW

### The Concept of the Malay Language

Language is an organized system of communication composed of linguistic units such as words, phrases, clauses, and sentences, which can be expressed both orally and in writing (Abalkheel and Sourani 2023). Additionally, language can be understood as the human capacity to communicate with others, whether through gestures (sign language) or spoken words, which are commonly used in daily interactions (Berger et al., 2022; (Kelly et al., 2023; Kita et al., 2023). Indonesia is home to hundreds of indigenous languages, each possessing distinct characteristics and grammatical structures. The grammatical system of a particular cultural group is closely linked to linguistic etiquette, which is in turn associated with politeness in language use. Noermanzah (2019) outlines several key aspects of linguistic politeness: 1) Politeness is an integral part of speech but does not constitute speech itself, 2) The perception of politeness is determined by the listener rather than the speaker, 3) Politeness is linked to the rights and obligations inherent in social interactions. In other words, an utterance is considered polite if the speaker respects the conversational rights of the interlocutor and

fulfills their communicative obligations.

Malay culture places great importance on politeness across all aspects of life (Wong, 2023), particularly in linguistic expression within society. One of the defining characteristics of the Malay language is its use of figurative speech, which conveys indirect meanings (Suryani et al., 2022). Figurative language plays a crucial role in shaping the values and character of Malay society. The transmission of Malay cultural values within families is reinforced using the Malay language as the primary mode of communication among family members (Nanda, 2023; Wang et al., 2024). In Malay society, the use of figurative expressions and metaphors is not only common but also serves as a distinctive cultural marker, particularly among the Riau Malay community (Hermandra, 2022). Figurative language can be understood as a stylistic device that employs comparisons or analogies to convey meaning, often reflected in literary works (Hermandra et al., 2024); (Lai et al., 2024). The prevalence of figurative speech in Riau Malay linguistic practices underscores the deep-rooted cultural significance of politeness and indirect communication in maintaining social harmony.

### **Character Education in Higher Education**

Character education is one of the fundamental objectives of national education. Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System explicitly states that "National education functions to develop capabilities and shape the character and civilization of a dignified nation in order to educate the life of the nation. It aims to develop students' potential to become individuals who are faithful and devoted to God Almighty, possess noble character, are healthy, knowledgeable, competent, creative, independent, and become democratic and responsible citizens." Furthermore, Ministerial Regulation No. 53 of 2023 on Quality Assurance in Higher Education, Article 6, stipulates that graduate competency standards must include an integration of attitudes,

skills, and knowledge that reflect students' achievements at the end of their higher education programs. This regulation aims to prepare students not only to be knowledgeable and skilled but also to demonstrate faith, piety, noble character, and strong moral values. Additionally, President Joko Widodo, in his policy direction, emphasized that to develop superior human resources (HR) between 2019 and 2024, five strategic actions must be implemented, one of which is the continuous enhancement of character education and the reinforcement of Pancasila values, including within higher education institutions.

At its core, character education can be understood as an effort to instill positive attitudes and moral awareness, which manifest in ethical behavior and wise decision-making (Nwachukwu et al., 2024); (White et al., 2017). It also refers to systematically designed and implemented initiatives that help students internalize values related to their relationship with God, themselves, others, the environment, and the nation. These values are expressed in thoughts, attitudes, emotions, speech, and actions based on religious, legal, ethical, cultural, and customary norms (Irhandayaningsih, 2013). The goal of character education is to cultivate a strong, competitive, moral, tolerant, cooperative, and patriotic nation that advances through knowledge and technology (Sadiyah, 2023).

The implementation of character education in higher education is essential and should be optimized by utilizing and empowering the learning environment to sustain character-building processes on campus (Samal, 2018; Susniwati et al., 2023). The principles guiding character education in higher education can be summarized as follows: 1) Continuity: Character development is a long-term process that begins when students enter higher education and continues until graduation. It is reinforced through coursework, self-development, and institutional culture, 2) Integration: Character



education must be embedded across all subjects, as well as in curricular, extracurricular, and co-curricular activities, 3) Experiential Learning: Character is not merely taught but developed and internalized through the learning process (Bary et al., 2020). As formal educational institutions, universities are not only responsible for facilitating intellectual development but also serve as platforms for character education (Oktarina et al., 2023; Yarime et al., 2012). The integration of character education in higher education ensures that students develop into well-rounded individuals who contribute positively to society, reinforcing moral values alongside academic and professional competencies.

### 3. METHOD

This study employs a literature review approach, allowing for the analysis and synthesis of various scholarly sources to develop a comprehensive understanding of the topic under investigation. A literature review involves the systematic collection and analysis of relevant references from academic journal articles, scholarly books, legal documents, and prior research related to character development through Malay culture. By employing this method, the study examines theoretical frameworks and empirical findings that underscore the importance of strengthening students' character through a culturally embedded approach, particularly within the context of Riau Malay allusions language.

In addition to a literature-based approach, this study also incorporates the author's direct observations and experiences as a lecturer in Riau Malay Cultural Education at Universitas Riau. The author's teaching experience provides valuable insights into students' character development and the challenges they face in internalizing cultural values within their academic environment. This perspective offers a more contextual and applied understanding of how language, as an integral component of

culture, contributes to shaping students' character while grounding them in local values. In this regard, the metaphorical expressions in Riau Malay serve not only as cultural artifacts that must be preserved but also as a medium for character development based on local wisdom.

The data analysis process in this study follows several key stages: (1) collecting data from relevant academic literature and authoritative sources, (2) reducing data by selecting the most significant and pertinent information, (3) organizing data into a systematic and structured framework, and (4) drawing conclusions to generate new insights. This methodological approach enables the study to present a comprehensive and well-structured argument for reintroducing the metaphorical use of the Riau Malay language as a strategic tool for character education in higher education institutions. By integrating local cultural elements into the higher education curriculum, this study contributes not only to the reinforcement of students' character development but also to a broader academic discourse on the significance of cultural integration in higher education.

### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Language plays a crucial role in shaping national identity, as reflected in the saying, "When language is lost, the nation perishes" (Idris et al., 2012). This proverb serves as a reminder for the younger generation, particularly university students in Riau, to preserve the Malay language as an integral part of Riau's cultural heritage. One of the defining characteristics of the Riau Malay language is its rich use of figurative expressions and implied meanings.

*Tepak emas di dulang suasa  
Tekat seraga sri perkasa  
Hendak mengenal orang berbangsa  
Lihat kepada budi dan bahasa  
Tekat seraga sri perkasa  
Merak mengigal ragam pusaga  
Lihat kepada budi dan bahasa*

*Rusak bahasa cederalah bangsa*

Translation:

A golden betel box on a gilded tray,  
Intricate embroidery, a mark of greatness.  
If you wish to recognize a cultured person,  
Observe their virtue and language.  
Intricate embroidery, a mark of greatness,  
A peacock dances in a patterned display.  
Observe their virtue and language, For when  
language deteriorates, a nation falters (Jamil  
et al., 2018).

The use of figurative language in Malay communication tends to rely on indirect expressions, often incorporating symbols, metaphors, and analogies. This approach enables messages to be conveyed in a refined and respectful manner, avoiding potential misunderstandings or offense. The reliance on such linguistic features reflects a deep-rooted emphasis on politeness, requiring speakers to carefully consider their audience. Jamil et al. (2018) argue that the people of Riau Malay culture tend to think metaphorically and prefer indirect expressions to demonstrate politeness, humility, and emotional sensitivity, thus minimizing the risk of conflict.

*Berbuah kayu rindang daunnya*  
*Bertuah melayu terbilang santunnya*  
*Elok kayu karena daunnya*  
*Elok melayu karena santunnya*

Translation:

A tree is fruitful when its leaves are lush,  
The esteemed Malay is renowned for  
politeness.  
A tree is beautiful because of its leaves,  
The Malay is dignified because of their  
courtesy (Effendy, 2010).

There are several important aspects regarding the use of figurative language in Riau Malay, namely:

**Expression of Politeness**

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In Riau Malay society, figurative language is often employed as a form of polite expression, reflecting the cultural values upheld by its people. Figurative language is generally perceived as a refined and respectful mode of communication, fostering harmonious interactions while demonstrating deference toward the interlocutor. Politeness in language is not only concerned with the choice of words or phrases but also involves a deep understanding of social contexts, interpersonal relationships, values, and cultural norms embedded within the community.

**Expression of Culture**

Beyond communication, figurative language also serves as a means of cultural expression, conveying messages and values that illustrate the socio-cultural dynamics of Riau Malay society. This function is particularly significant, as language is one of the most fundamental manifestations of culture, reflecting a community's values, beliefs, history, and worldview. Consequently, figurative expressions are often presented in the form of pantun (traditional Malay poetry), proverbs, or idiomatic phrases that incorporate symbols and contextual references from the local Malay community.

**Expression of Thought**

Mastering the use of figurative language requires a sophisticated understanding of both linguistic structures and cultural contexts. However, many younger generations of Riau Malays perceive figurative language as overly verbose and indirect. In reality, the use of figurative language signifies a high level of cognitive and analytical thinking. Individuals with a profound grasp of the Riau Malay language and culture are typically more adept at employing figurative expressions. Nevertheless, this skill can be cultivated through continuous learning and practice, enabling language to function not merely as a tool for transmitting messages but also as an instrument for preserving

and strengthening social and cultural relationships within the Riau Malay community.

These three aspects underscore the importance of figurative language in shaping individuals with strong cultural identities and ethical values. In this regard, figurative language serves as a crucial instrument in fostering the character development of university students, particularly at Universitas Riau. Character education in higher education remains a fundamental aspect of academic development, as character is a key indicator of the educational process's success. Lickona (1991) argues that character education is a deliberate effort to help individuals understand, appreciate, and act upon ethical values in their daily lives. Moreover, character is regarded as an essential attribute that distinguishes human beings as dignified entities based on their morality and ethics (Hostiuc et al., 2019; Zhuang et al., 2022). Educational institutions play a pivotal role in the development and preservation of local culture. Through structured learning processes, universities are expected to instill and strengthen students' character (Attruk, A'yun, and Mujahidah 2024). The formation of student character can be reinforced through the integration of cultural values derived from local traditions. Character values that emerge from the cultural heritage of a community (local wisdom) are often more aligned with national identity and personality (Rosenmann et al., 2016).

University students should not only be nurtured in terms of intellectual capacity but also in character, ensuring that they are well-prepared to become responsible national and global citizens. Through character education, students are expected to independently enhance and apply their knowledge while internalizing core values that manifest in their daily behavior (Choli, 2020). This vision aligns with the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture Regulation No. 53 of 2023 on Higher Education Quality Assurance, Article 6, which establishes that graduate competency standards must include

attitudes, skills, and knowledge that students should achieve upon completing their academic programs. This regulation aims to prepare students to become individuals who are faithful, pious, virtuous, and possess strong character aligned with Pancasila values. Additionally, graduates are expected to be capable of independently applying, developing, and discovering knowledge and technology that benefit society while actively enhancing their potential.

The development of students' attitudes and ethical competencies can also be facilitated through a figurative language-based approach in higher education, particularly within courses related to Malay culture. One effective strategy involves the incorporation of figurative expressions in classroom discussions and interactions. Beyond preserving traditional figurative language, this approach enables students to explore the deeper meanings and symbolic representations embedded in the language. Such activities can be systematically structured into learning strategies, ensuring their effectiveness in supporting students' character formation in higher education. The character development of university students can be fostered through the study of Malay culture by integrating figurative language into higher education curricula. As part of the curriculum, Riau Malay can be taught using simple strategies, such as incorporating figurative expressions into the learning process. In addition to preserving this linguistic tradition, this approach allows students to explore the meanings and symbols embedded within the language, thereby enhancing their character development. These activities can be arranged in a pattern or flow of learning strategies, such as:

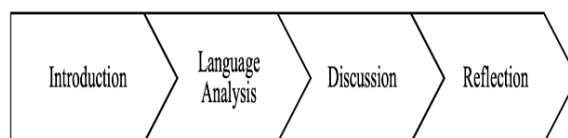


Figure 1. Allusions Malay-Based Learning

The figure above illustrates a learning strategy designed to strengthen students' character through the use of figurative language in Riau Malay. This approach leverages the power of language as a tool for shaping students' character. The first step involves reintroducing students to Riau Malay figurative expressions, including idioms, metaphors, and analogies commonly used in the language. Following this, students engage in discussions on real-life examples, analyzing their meanings and intended purposes. Furthermore, students are encouraged to conduct in-depth analyses of Riau Malay figurative expressions by identifying the symbols used and interpreting their meanings within the cultural and social context of Riau Malay society. These discussions also extend to ethical considerations in language use, particularly linguistic etiquette (formal, neutral, and informal registers). This process helps students understand how to communicate with politeness and respect while avoiding language misuse that could offend others. Given that Riau Malay places a strong emphasis on politeness and decorum, linguistic etiquette is a crucial aspect of its cultural identity.

The learning process concludes with a reflective activity in which students evaluate their experiences in using and analyzing figurative language. This reflection is intended to help them internalize key lessons that contribute to character development and the reinforcement of positive values, which are essential for achieving university graduate competencies. Mastering ethical and courteous communication is regarded as a reflection of good character. Since character education in higher education is essential, it serves as a fundamental aspect of shaping students into individuals who embody the nation's ideological values while also reinforcing the character foundation they acquired in previous educational levels (Husaeni, 2023).

This initiative also functions as a safeguard against the negative influences of rapid technological advancement and unrestricted access to information, both of which pose risks to students' character development. Enhancing character education can serve as a foundation and guiding principle for the millennial generation as they navigate the complexities of globalization (Hanafiah et al., 2024; Wahono, 2018; Zalli, 2024). Furthermore, character reinforcement based on local wisdom prepares students for the globalized world by fostering their appreciation for local values and cultural heritage (Da Silva et al., 2024). Beyond moral reinforcement, character education in higher education plays a central role in enhancing students' motivation and academic performance (Irmawati, 2023; Pattaro, 2016). Therefore, universities, particularly faculty members, bear the responsibility of continuously fostering students' character development. The significance of character education is also reflected in the National Character Education Action Plan, published by the Ministry of Education in 2010, which highlights character development as a key component in achieving Indonesia's national development vision as outlined in the RPJP 2005–2025.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Cultural expression through language is one of the most fundamental manifestations of culture, as language serves as the primary tool for human communication, understanding of the world, and expression of identity. One notable example is the cultural identity of Riau Malays, which is reflected in the use of figurative language that strongly emphasizes courtesy and politeness. In addition to upholding politeness, the Malay language adheres to linguistic ethics, which are categorized into three main classifications: bahasa Melayu mendaki (elevated Malay), bahasa Melayu mendatar (neutral Malay), and bahasa Melayu menurun (colloquial Malay). The



use of figurative language in Riau Malay encompasses several crucial aspects, namely expressions of politeness, cultural representation, and intellectual articulation.

Instructional strategies aimed at strengthening students' character through figurative Riau Malay can be designed by leveraging the power of language as a medium for shaping values, attitudes, and behaviors in character education. Effective learning models may include stages such as introduction, linguistic analysis, discussion, and reflection. By implementing these instructional strategies, students are expected to develop a deeper understanding of figurative Riau Malay and how it can serve as an effective tool for character formation and the reinforcement of positive values in social life].

This research contributes to the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage through language. By highlighting the importance of figurative Malay language, this research encourages efforts to preserve and revitalize these forms of cultural expression. This research raises awareness of the sociolinguistic significance of language and how language shapes identities, values, and behaviors. These findings can inform language policies and educational practices that value linguistic diversity and cultural inclusion.

The weakness of this study lies in the focus of the study. Since this study focuses on Riau Malay, the findings may not be generalizable to other languages or cultures. Further research is needed to examine whether similar strategies can be applied in different cultural and linguistic environments.

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