



## Transformation of Indonesian language learning: Integration of deep learning strategy with character education in the era of independent learning

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**Abstract:** This study explores the integration of deep learning strategies with character education in the teaching of Bahasa Indonesia within the framework of the Merdeka (Independent) Curriculum. The primary objective is to examine how this pedagogical approach fosters meaningful, reflective, and context-driven learning experiences for students. Employing a qualitative descriptive method, the research was conducted at SMP Muhammadiyah 1 Makassar using participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis involving Bahasa Indonesia (Indonesian language) teachers and Grade VIII students. Findings reveal that the application of deep learning strategies actively engages students through text analysis, value-based discussions, and reflective writing, enhancing not only cognitive comprehension but also the internalization of core character values such as empathy, honesty, and responsibility. Teachers act as transformative facilitators who cultivate dialogic and humanistic learning environments, in alignment with the vision of the Merdeka Curriculum. Despite challenges such as limited instructional time and varying levels of student readiness, the approach has proven effective in shaping learners who are academically capable and morally grounded. In conclusion, the integration of deep learning and character education serves as a vital bridge between academic achievement and personal development. This research contributes both theoretically and practically to the development of adaptive, value-oriented instructional models relevant to 21st-century education. Moreover, it enriches the global discourse on holistic, values-based education and underscores the critical role of teachers as transformative agents in humanizing the learning process.

**Keywords:** character; contextual learning; deep learning; holistic education; moral values

### Introduction

Global education is currently undergoing a significant transformation that emphasizes holistic, contextual learning and is oriented towards character development and 21st century skills. The UNESCO report (2021) emphasizes the importance of an educational approach that not only focuses on cognitive aspects but also includes students' social, emotional, and moral dimensions (Kasa et al., 2023). In line with this, various countries have begun to adopt flexible and competency-based curricula in order to respond to the increasingly complex challenges of the times, including technological, social, and cultural changes. One approach that is developing globally is *deep learning*, which focuses on deep understanding, critical thinking, and value formation (Mathew et al., 2021).

In Indonesia, this educational transformation is reflected in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum, which marks a paradigm shift towards more adaptive and student-

centered learning. This curriculum provides teachers and schools with the flexibility to adjust the learning process to the characteristics, needs, and potential of students. Not only emphasizing mastery of the material, the Independent Curriculum also encourages strengthening character values and 21st-century competencies, such as collaboration, creativity, communication, and critical thinking. According to (Muliawan, 2024) and (Munawir et al., 2024), the implementation of the Independent Curriculum allows for the creation of more meaningful contextual learning, because teachers can design adaptive and participatory learning strategies. In this context, the role of the teacher shifts from merely conveying material to being a learning facilitator who encourages student independence and reflection.

One of the strategic subjects in supporting the spirit of the Independent Curriculum is Indonesian. Learning Indonesian is not only aimed at improving students' language competence, but also as a medium for internalizing the values of life, culture, and nationality. Through reading, writing, discussing, and understanding texts, students can learn about empathy, responsibility, honesty, and the noble values of the nation (Septiani et al., 2023). (Fitriyanti et al., 2023) emphasized that learning Indonesian has an important function in strengthening character education, because it is full of moral messages and cultural content. Therefore, Indonesian lessons are a strategic vehicle for forming students who are not only academically intelligent, but also have strong character.

In supporting deep and meaningful learning, the approach *deep learning* become very relevant for adoption (Mohammed & Kora, 2023). In the international context, *deep learning* is seen as a learning strategy that emphasizes conceptual understanding, development of metacognitive skills, and linking them to real-life contexts (Bhatt et al., 2021). This approach has been widely applied in various countries to increase students' active participation, strengthen emotional engagement, and foster reflective thinking (Yu & Ma, 2021). In the context of Indonesian language lessons, *deep learning* can be applied through analysis of literary texts, writing reflective essays, and critical discussions on social and cultural issues (Ahmed et al., 2023).

However, the implementation of this approach still faces challenges in various developing countries, including Indonesia. Classroom learning is still dominated by conventional approaches that are oriented towards memorization and lectures, and minimal student involvement (Septiani et al., 2023). There are still many teachers who do not understand the concept of in-depth learning comprehensively (Nafisah et al., 2024; Zidan & Qamariah, 2023). In addition, structural barriers such as limited training, resources, and time also become inhibiting factors for learning innovation (Harrison et al., 2020).

Responding to this challenge, a number of international studies show that integration between *deep learning* and character education can be an effective approach in improving the quality of learning (Wakhid et al., 2021). Character education should not be a separate program, but needs to be integrated into the entire learning process. Through literary texts that are rich in meaning and cultural values, students not only learn language, but also absorb moral and social values that shape their personality (Riyadi & Budiman, 2023). Thus, learning Indonesian can be an important means of forming character while developing *higher-order thinking skills* (Ryan & Bowman, 2022).

Taking into account this urgency, it is important to conduct a more in-depth study of the Indonesian language learning model which combines a multidisciplinary approach. *deep learning* and character education within the framework of the Independent Curriculum. (Nugroho et al., 2023) emphasized that the main challenge of education today is not just delivering material, but also forming reflective, independent, and character-based students. Therefore, this study aims to identify how integrative and contextual Indonesian language learning strategies can be implemented effectively. The main focus of this study is on the development of a learning model that not only improves students' academic abilities but also forms a strong character in facing global challenges. The novelty of this study lies in the combination of two main approaches—*deep learning* and character education – in the context of Indonesian language learning that is responsive to the dynamics of the Independent Curriculum and global educational developments (Janiesch et al., 2021).

## Literature Review

### Independent Curriculum and Learning Transformation in Indonesia

The Independent Curriculum is a form of fundamental transformation in the Indonesian education system designed to respond to the dynamics of the times, the demands of globalization, and the needs of today's students (Rahayu, 2025). This curriculum emerged as a response to various criticisms of educational approaches that were too centralistic, rigid, and less contextual. In the Independent Curriculum, the Indonesian government through the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology emphasizes the importance of providing greater autonomy to educational units and teachers in designing and implementing learning processes that are in line with the potential, needs, and characteristics of students and the local context (Rahayu, 2025).

One of the central elements in the Independent Curriculum is curriculum flexibility. This is demonstrated through the simplification of basic competencies and curriculum structure, the elimination of linear and content-dense learning, and the provision of space for educational units to independently develop school operational curricula (KOS) (Setiawan et al., 2023). Teachers are given the freedom to determine the learning approaches, methods, and media that best suit the classroom context and student character. This has implications for a shift in the educational paradigm, from a teacher-centered to a student-centered learning approach, from simply memorizing content to understanding concepts, from standardization to differentiation, and from knowledge transmission to the process of developing competencies and character (Yolanda et al., 2025).

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology also emphasized that the Independent Curriculum not only aims to produce students who are cognitively intelligent, but also have strong moral and social integrity (Murdiono & Wuryandani, 2021). Through the integration of the Pancasila Student Profile, this curriculum targets the formation of people who are faithful, pious, globally diverse, cooperative, independent, critical thinkers, and creative (Irawan et al., 2023). These values are in line with the demands of 21st-century competencies that include not only academic skills, but also social, emotional, and spiritual competencies.

In practice, the transformation of learning carried out by the Independent Curriculum requires profound changes in the role of teachers, learning design, and evaluation systems (Adha et al., 2023). Teachers are no longer positioned as the only source of knowledge, but rather as facilitators, mentors, and guides for students' learning processes. Teachers must be able to create a learning space that is conducive to the exploration of ideas, critical reflection, collaboration, and meaningful learning. The learning environment must allow for active involvement of students in the process of searching for meaning, not just passive recipients of information. This is where the approach *deep learning* or *deep learning* finds its relevance (Sharifani & Amini, 2023).

(Muliawan, 2024) in his research emphasized that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum has encouraged a significant shift in pedagogical practices. He noted that the learning approach, which was previously very oriented towards content and assessment of final results, has begun to shift towards a more holistic approach. The focus is now on the learning process, in-depth understanding of concepts, development of reflective and critical thinking skills, and instilling character values in every learning activity (Murdiono & Wuryandani, 2021). Teachers are encouraged to design project-based learning, real-world challenges, and cross-disciplinary approaches that enable students to develop problem-solving skills and global literacy.

Furthermore, (Muliawan, 2024) explains that this paradigm shift is not only structural but also cultural. The implementation of the Independent Curriculum requires changes in school culture, including the way teachers design learning, the way students learn, and the way schools build collaborative and inclusive learning ecosystems. Approach *deep learning*, which emphasizes the development of deep understanding, contextual relevance, and emotional engagement of students, is very relevant in responding to the spirit of the Independent Curriculum (Mathew et al., 2021). This approach also supports the integration of character education in a more meaningful way because it allows students to internalize values through authentic and reflective learning experiences.

In the context of learning Indonesian, the Independent Curriculum provides extensive opportunities to integrate *deep learning* and character education (Zhang et al., 2023). This is

because Indonesian is not only a subject that discusses language structure, but also a means to understand culture, social values, and build critical awareness of the realities of life. Indonesian language learning designed in accordance with the spirit of the Merdeka Curriculum can raise contextual issues, develop critical dialogues about human values, and shape students' social sensitivity through text analysis, literacy activities, and reflective discussions (Irwan et al., 2024).

For example, in learning narrative texts, teachers can invite students not only to understand the structure of the text, but also to explore moral messages, cultural values, and the relevance of the story to everyday life. Approach *deep learning* will help students dig deeper into the meaning of the story, assess the actions of characters based on certain values, and reflect on how these values can be implemented in their lives (Mousavi & Beroza, 2022). This process allows for the integration of literacy competency mastery with character formation simultaneously.

Furthermore, the Independent Curriculum also encourages the implementation of formative assessments that are diagnostic and reflective, not just summative (Limiansi et al., 2023). This is in line with the principle *deep learning* which emphasizes the process as an important part of successful learning (Mehrish et al., 2023). Teachers are encouraged to better understand students' learning development, provide constructive feedback, and build empathetic and supportive communication. Assessment not only measures what students know, but also how they think, process, and develop values within themselves.

The Independent Curriculum provides ample space and a strong foundation for developing integrative, participatory, and character-oriented Indonesian language learning (Mukhibat, 2023). This transformation not only requires technical changes in the preparation of the syllabus or lesson plan, but also changes in the way educators think. Pedagogical awareness and ethical commitment are needed to bring the spirit of this curriculum to life in daily classroom practice. Therefore, the integration of approaches *deep learning* and character education in Indonesian language learning can be a strategic step in realizing the vision of the Independent Curriculum as a curriculum that liberates, empowers, and humanizes students (Sharma et al., 2021).

### **Character Education in the Context of Language Learning**

Character education has become a strategic issue in Indonesian education policy, especially since the integration of character values into the 2013 Curriculum and continued in the Merdeka Curriculum (Chamisijatin et al., 2023). In a global context, character education has also become an inseparable part of the 21st century education agenda that focuses on developing holistic competencies, including social and emotional competencies (Nari et al., 2023). In Indonesia, character education is not only the responsibility of families and communities, but is also formally internalized in the learning process at school.

According to Lickona, character education includes three main dimensions: moral knowledge, moral feelings or attitudes, and moral action (Rijal et al., 2022). These three dimensions emphasize that character formation is not enough only through understanding values, but must also include affective involvement and real application in student actions. Therefore, an effective character education strategy must be able to reach all of these dimensions simultaneously and sustainably.

In learning Indonesian, character education finds fertile ground to be planted. Language is not only a means of communication, but also a medium for expressing culture, values, and identity (Sutrisno, 2023). The Indonesian language subject does not only emphasize linguistic aspects, but is also full of moral and social values. Through learning narrative, descriptive, and argumentative texts, teachers have a great opportunity to invite students to reflect on various life values, such as honesty, responsibility, tolerance, empathy, and cooperation. (Septiani et al., 2023) emphasized that Indonesian as a subject with local and national content can be a vehicle for character formation, especially because of the strong relationship between language, culture, and identity. The texts used in learning often contain values of local wisdom, struggle, social solidarity, and spirituality. Learning developed through a contextual approach will enable students to relate learning materials to the realities of their daily lives. (Fitriyanti et al., 2023) also underlines the role of literary texts in shaping students' characters. Literature, both fiction and non-fiction, functions as a mirror of life that presents social reality aesthetically and reflectively. When students read short stories, novels, poems, or dramas, they not only

understand the content of the story, but are also invited to experience the inner conflicts of the characters, understand moral dilemmas, and develop empathy for others. This activity has great potential to foster ethical awareness and strengthen social values in depth.

Furthermore, international research also strengthens the importance of integrating character education into language learning (Wang et al., 2021). They found that character education programs that are explicitly and consistently integrated into the curriculum have a significant impact on students' prosocial behavior, decreased negative behavior, and increased academic achievement. One of the main characteristics of successful programs is their connection to authentic learning contexts, such as in language and literature learning.

Meanwhile, Nucci (Nucci, 2024) emphasizes that effective moral and character education does not stand alone as a separate lesson, but is integrated into subjects that require value reflection, such as language, history, and religion. In this context, learning Indonesian can be a platform for developing what they call *ethical literacy*—students' ability to recognize, evaluate, and make moral decisions in complex social contexts (Huda & Hashim, 2022).

In Finland, a country known for its humanistic education system, a values-based approach to language learning has become part of the national curriculum (Su, 2022). Character education in Finland is integrated through ethical discussions in language classes, where students are encouraged to express their opinions, listen to others' perspectives, and reflect on the moral consequences of the actions of characters in the text (Sukarno & Riyadini, 2024). Such practices strengthen critical thinking skills, self-awareness, and concern for others—all of which are at the heart of noble character.

However, although the potential for integrating character education into Indonesian language learning is very large, its implementation in the field still faces various challenges. One of them is the limited explicit value-based learning planning. Teachers' Learning Implementation Plans (RPP) often only include character values normatively, without a clear and systematic implementation strategy. In addition, the learning approaches used tend to still be *teacher-centered* and focus on cognitive aspects, thus inhibiting the formation of the reflective and dialogical space needed for internalizing values (Murphy et al., 2021).

As stated by (Murdiono & Wuryandani, 2021), many teachers have not received special training in integrating character education into teaching and learning activities, especially at the operational level such as selecting materials, designing activities, and developing evaluations that measure students' affective and moral aspects. In fact, approaches such as project-based learning, problem-based learning, and value discussion proven to be effective in actively building students' character awareness (Widiana et al., 2022).

In the context of the Independent Curriculum, the opportunity to revitalize character education in Indonesian language learning is wide open. This curriculum emphasizes the profile of Pancasila students, which consists of six main dimensions: faith and devotion to God Almighty, global diversity, mutual cooperation, independence, critical thinking, and creativity (Rahayu, 2025). These dimensions are not only the ultimate goal of education, but can also be used as a guide to developing learning activities that are integrated with character values. In Indonesian language subjects, each dimension can be actualized through exploration of themes, characters, storylines, and contextual writing and discussion activities.

Therefore, the integration of character education in Indonesian language learning needs to be designed strategically and pedagogically. Teachers are required to not only be language teachers, but also facilitators of personality development. This role requires strong pedagogical competence, value sensitivity, and reflective skills in managing the classroom. Learning evaluation must also include affective and social aspects, not just cognitive, so that character education truly touches the deepest dimensions of students (Munawir et al., 2024).

Thus, character education in learning Indonesian is not only a normative agenda, but also a transformative approach that can change the learning process into a meaningful life experience. Through language, students learn to understand themselves, others, and the world. Through text, they learn to read values, consider moral choices, and affirm their identity. And through dialogue, they learn to appreciate differences, weave empathy, and build a more humane society.

### Approach Deep Learning in Education

*Deep learning* in the context of education is a pedagogical approach that emphasizes the cognitive, affective, and metacognitive involvement of students in the learning process. This approach does not merely target superficial mastery of information, but aims to form a deep understanding, critical thinking skills, inter-conceptual connections, and real-life applications (Janiesch et al., 2021). Different from *surface learning*, which is usually oriented towards memorization and short-term results, *deep learning* demands active involvement of students in formulating meaning, testing ideas, and internalizing values and concepts.

(Dong et al., 2021) stated that *deep learning* helps students build stronger conceptual understanding through the integration of new knowledge with existing experiences and schemas. Within a constructivist framework, this process allows students to construct meaning personally and contextually, which in turn forms reflective skills, deep communication, and ethical awareness. Therefore, this approach is very much in line with character education, because it demands not only the mastery of knowledge, but also the transformation of attitudes and behavior.

In international literature, *deep learning* approach has been studied as an integral part of 21st century education and the transformation of global learning systems. (Biggs et al., 2022), in their book *Teaching for quality learning at university 5e*, explain that *deep learning* requires instructional design that encourages problem solving, application of theory to practice, and the ability to evaluate and synthesize information. They emphasize that this approach can only be successful if the learning environment supports student independence, provides space for exploration, and provides reflective feedback.

In a study that distinguished between deep and surface learning, it was found that students with a deep learning orientation tend to search for meaning in the subject matter, link ideas to previous experiences, and evaluate arguments critically (Iqbal et al., 2023). These findings provide an important foundation for developing teaching theories that are oriented toward understanding, rather than just mastery of content. In a recent study, (Bowman et al., 2022) examined the implementation *deep learning* in secondary schools in the UK and found that students' emotional and cognitive engagement in the learning process had a positive impact on their development. *Higher-order thinking skills*, such as analytical, evaluation, and synthesis skills. The study also emphasized the importance of collaborative, supportive, and contextual learning-based teacher-student relationships. When students feel safe and valued in the learning process, they are more likely to be open to critical thinking and exploring ideas in depth. (Yang, 2022), in their study in China, developed a narrative text-based learning model to improve *deep learning* in language learning. The results of the study showed that this approach not only improves students' semantic understanding, but also forms sensitivity to moral values contained in the text and their ability to express ideas reflectively. This proves that *deep learning* can be an effective medium in character education through contextual and narrative processing of meaning.

This approach has also received attention within the framework of higher education. (Kamberi, 2025) stated that *deep learning* at the university level correlates with intrinsic motivation, long-term learning orientation, and learning satisfaction. In a competitive academic environment, students who develop a *deep approach do not just study* for exams, but for understanding and applying ideas in professional and social contexts. The importance of *deep learning* in building global competencies are students' ability to critically analyze real-world problems, think across perspectives, and demonstrate social concern. *Deep learning* in this view, it is not just a learning approach, but rather a philosophical foundation for future education that humanizes the learning process and enables students to become reflective and responsible actors of social change (Mohammed & Kora, 2023).

In the Indonesian context, integration *deep learning* in learning Indonesian has its own significance. Indonesian as a subject not only teaches linguistic aspects, but also touches on cultural, moral, and human values aspects (Mehrish et al., 2023). Therefore, learning Indonesian with an approach *deep learning* can enrich students' understanding of identity, nationality, and social responsibility.

For example, the use of literary texts such as short stories, poems, or novels can be used

as an entry point to build reflective discussions about the values of honesty, justice, and empathy. Teachers can invite students to not only analyze the structure of the text but also explore hidden meanings, compare the character's experiences with real life, and write personal reflections. These activities encourage deep cognitive and affective engagement, while strengthening character values through authentic learning experiences (Matsuo et al., 2022).

Research (Aisyah & Novita, 2025) in Indonesia shows that the approach *deep learning* in learning Indonesian can improve students' critical thinking skills and social sensitivity, especially when accompanied by project-based learning methods and reflective discussions. This shows that the application of *deep learning* not only relevant in a global context, but can also be contextualized effectively in the national education system, especially through the Independent Curriculum which provides flexible space for teachers and students to explore in depth.

Thus, the approach *deep learning* in education is not just a technical strategy, but a philosophical and pedagogical approach that is oriented towards humanizing the learning process (Yu & Ma, 2021). This approach encourages students to become true learners: individuals who are able to think deeply, reflect on values, connect ideas, and apply their knowledge for the good of themselves and society. In the midst of the current of globalization and the challenges of the 21st century, *deep learning* become a bridge between academic education and character formation, between learning to know and learning to be (Sharifani & Amini, 2023).

Based on the literature review above, it can be concluded that there has been a lot of research on the Independent Curriculum, character education, and *deep learning*. However, there is a research gap in terms of combining the three in a complete learning framework, especially in the Indonesian language subject. In addition, previous studies are generally still conceptual or partial, not providing a concrete and contextual picture of the learning model. Therefore, this study has a strategic position to fill this gap by compiling an Indonesian language learning model based on *deep learning* which is integrated with character education within the framework of the Independent Curriculum.

## Method

This study will use a qualitative approach with a descriptive method to deeply understand the process of integrating deep learning with character education in Indonesian language learning at SMP Muhammadiyah 1 Makassar. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore phenomena holistically and contextually, which states that qualitative research is suitable for understanding the meaning that individuals give to a phenomenon (Levitt, 2021). Data collection will be conducted through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation analysis. Participatory observation allows researchers to be directly involved in the learning process, so they can directly observe how deep learning and character education are integrated in the classroom. In-depth interviews will be conducted with Indonesian language teachers and students to obtain their perspectives on the effectiveness and challenges in implementing this method. Documentation analysis involves reviewing the Learning Implementation Plan (RPP), teaching materials, and student learning outcomes to understand the extent to which the integration is reflected in the planning and implementation of learning. This triangulation method is expected to increase the validity of the data (Hammerton & Munafö, 2021).

The subjects of this study were Indonesian language teachers and grade VIII students at SMP Muhammadiyah 1 Makassar. The selection of subjects was based on the consideration that grade VIII is an important stage in the development of students' language skills and character. In addition, SMP Muhammadiyah 1 Makassar was chosen because it has implemented the Merdeka Curriculum which provides flexibility in the development of innovative learning methods, including the integration of deep learning and character education. This is in line with research (Matsuo et al., 2022) which highlights the importance of the role of teachers in shaping students' character through learning (Qudratuddarsi et al., 2024).

Data analysis will be carried out thematically by following the steps outlined by (Braun &

Clarke, 2023), namely: (1) familiarization with the data through transcription and repeated reading, (2) initial coding to identify potential themes, (3) searching for themes by grouping similar codes, (4) reviewing themes to ensure consistency and relevance, (5) naming and defining themes, and (6) compiling a report of the analysis results. This approach allows researchers to identify significant patterns in the data related to the integration of deep learning and character education in Indonesian language learning.

To ensure the credibility and validity of the data, this study will apply source and method triangulation techniques. Source triangulation is done by comparing information obtained from various informants, while method triangulation involves the use of various data collection techniques such as observation, interviews, and documentation analysis. In addition, member checking will be done by asking informants to verify the results of the interviews and research findings, to ensure that the researcher's interpretation is in accordance with their experiences and perspectives. These steps are in accordance with the recommendations of (Finn et al., 2022) regarding strategies to increase trustworthiness in qualitative research.

## Results and Discussion

This research was conducted at SMP Muhammadiyah 1 Makassar with a focus on strategy integration. *deep learning* and character education in learning Indonesian for grade VIII students. Learning activities took place in four meetings with the main material of short story texts and exemplum texts. Data were collected through participatory observation methods, in-depth interviews with teachers and students, and analysis of learning planning documents.

The findings show that teachers have consciously developed an approach learning which not only emphasizes cognitive mastery, but is also oriented towards strengthening the affective and moral dimensions of students. This approach is realized through strategies *deep learning* which encourages students to think critically, reflectively, and relate new knowledge to personal experiences and everyday life values.

## Reflection-Based Learning and Value Construction

The learning process begins with the activation of prior knowledge through open-ended questions and stimulating discussions designed to build personal connections between students and the learning material. In short story learning, for example, teachers not only ask students to identify intrinsic elements of the text, but also guide them to critically examine the symbolic meaning, moral values, and social implications of the character's actions. Students are then directed to do group work, discuss the character's attitudes, and compile written reflections that describe their meaning of the story's message. This approach encourages the formation of *learning community* collaborative, while facilitating the development of students' critical and emotional literacy capacities (Gibson et al., 2023).

Open-ended questions such as "What values did you learn from this story?" or "*How would you act if you were in that character's position*" proven effective in encouraging students to explore alternative perspectives, compare with personal experiences, and construct ethical arguments based on values. This process shows that teachers not only function as transmitters of knowledge, but also as facilitators of character formation and students' moral reasoning (Rao et al., 2024).

Observations show that character values are not taught verbally or normatively, but rather internalized through a reflective and contextual learning process. Values such as empathy, honesty, responsibility, and respect for differences emerge organically in student discussions and writing. For example, one student wrote a reflection on the importance of forgiving in response to a short story about conflict between friends. This shows a transformation in understanding from simply reading the text to affective involvement and deeper personal meaning (Batini et al., 2021).

In addition to cognitive and affective aspects, students' emotional engagement is an important indicator of the success of this strategy. From the interview results, most students expressed that they felt more connected to the lesson when given space to express personal views and experiences. The task of writing reflections became a medium of expression that they considered meaningful, because it allowed freedom of opinion within a structured academic



framework (Cummings et al., 2024).

Although *deep learning* strategy in learning Indonesian shows great potential, its implementation is not free from challenges (Sharma et al., 2021). Some students experience obstacles in expressing reflections in depth, either due to limited writing skills or minimal reflective thinking habits in the previous learning process. In addition, the limited time allocation in the structure of class hours is a major obstacle in exploring values and meanings in depth.

From the teacher's side, the need for ongoing training that is practical and contextual has been identified. Although they have shown initiative to implement transformative learning, teachers' conceptual understanding of *deep learning* is still relatively limited (Matsuo et al., 2022). Teachers conveyed the need for assistance in holistic strategic planning and development *best practices* based on field experience to improve learning effectiveness (Cheng, 2021). Student adaptation to this reflective learning model takes place gradually. Some students admitted to feeling awkward and confused when first asked to relate texts to personal experiences. However, with consistent guidance, they began to show improvements in critical thinking, arguing, and building confidence in expressing opinions.

This study provides empirical evidence that strategy integration of *deep learning* and character education in Indonesian language learning not only enables the achievement of curriculum objectives cognitively, but also encourages the formation of reflective, empathetic, and strong-character students (Popel et al., 2020). This finding supports the urgency of developing a learning model based on *student-centered learning* within the framework of the Independent Curriculum, which positions students as active subjects in the process of searching for meaning, not just recipients of information.

In this context, Indonesian language learning plays a strategic role as a dialogical space to foster awareness of values, critical literacy skills, and the formation of students' identities as cultured and integrated citizens. Therefore, strengthening teacher capacity, adaptive learning design, and support for educational policies oriented towards meaningful learning are key factors in the sustainability of this approach (Syafari et al., 2024).

Furthermore, *deep learning* approach which is applied also organically internalizes character values into the learning process. There is no artificial separation between mastery of academic material and instillation of moral values (Hu et al., 2021). Instead, both run simultaneously in an interactive space facilitated by the teacher. This strengthens the view that character formation is not effectively carried out through normative moral lectures, but rather through learning experiences that touch the realm of students' inner consciousness and self-reflection (Sertdemir, 2022). Thus, learning Indonesian not only acts as an instrument for transmitting linguistic knowledge, but also as a medium for forming students' social ethics and self-awareness.

This finding also reflects the essence of the Independent Curriculum paradigm which encourages education to transform into a more humane, relevant, and contextual process. The Independent Curriculum demands pedagogical flexibility, strengthening the value dimension through *Pancasila Student Profile*, as well as the development of learning that stimulates *sense of meaning* in students (Qulsum, 2022). Teachers in this study have played a strategic role as transformative facilitators, who not only deliver material, but also build a dialogical ecosystem in the classroom, in accordance with the findings (Kasim et al., 2021), which emphasize that teachers are the main agents of student character transformation through reflective learning strategies.

Theoretically, the success of this approach can also be analyzed through the lens of social constructivism proposed by (Dolata & Schwabe, 2023), which states that knowledge is built through the interaction between personal experience and social context. In this study, learning activities such as writing reflections and group discussions not only improve cognitive aspects, but also strengthen students' emotional attachment and moral identity. In other words, learning designed based on the principle *deep learning* has succeeded in simultaneously activating the head (ratio), heart (emotion), and hands (action) in students (Dukić & Sovic Krzic, 2022).

However, it cannot be denied that the implementation of this approach also faces a number of structural and cultural challenges. Limited learning time, gaps in student readiness, and limited teacher competence in designing strategies. *deep learning* optimally, becoming an obstacle that

hinders the effectiveness of this approach (Niu et al., 2021). Teachers in this study acknowledged that ongoing training is needed to develop skills in designing reflective learning activities.

Moreover, the integration of character education in learning cannot be seen as an additional activity, but rather as an inherent and continuous process (Holst, 2023). The success of this strategy is highly dependent on the consistency and sensitivity of teachers in creating a safe, dialogic, and inclusive learning space. When students feel valued and heard, the process of internalizing values will take place more naturally and deeply. In this context, Indonesian texts become more than just teaching materials; they become a medium for self-reflection and identity building.

Thus, Indonesian language learning is based on *deep learning* integrated with character education not only succeeded in improving students' academic achievement but also contributed to the development of a holistic human being (Sharma et al., 2021). This proves that educational transformation truly lies not only in curriculum innovation, but in the creativity and commitment of teachers in designing learning experiences that arouse reason, move feelings, and foster values. This research is an important contribution to the discourse on developing a learning model that is oriented towards a balance between *academic excellence* and *character formation*, as well as being a conceptual basis for the development of contextual learning strategies within the framework of the Independent Curriculum in the future (Vitchenko et al., 2022).

### **Contribution of Local Educational Innovation to Global Discourse**

This research makes an important contribution to the global discourse on the transformation of 21st century education that demands holistic and meaningful learning. Integration of strategies *deep learning* with character education in learning Indonesian at SMP Muhammadiyah 1 Makassar in line with the framework developed, which emphasizes the need for learning that not only improves complex cognitive abilities, but also fosters students' ethical awareness through authentic learning contexts. Furthermore, this approach supports the model *Moral and Ethical Development* from (Narvaez, 2021), which combines aspects of neuropsychology and social and cultural context in character development. In the realm of character learning, this finding strengthens the principles *Social-Emotional Learning*, that the development of social and emotional competencies is an important foundation in today's education (Levin & Segev, 2023). The approach *deep learning* which combines discussion of values in literary texts to strengthen the development of students' character strengths, as explained in the model *Character Strengths and Virtues* which encourages the development of positive potential authentically (Niemiec & Pearce, 2021).

In addition, this finding is also in accordance with the principle *Transformative Learning* the latest that highlights the importance of a learning process that combines cognitive, emotional, and spiritual dimensions to encourage changes in students' perspectives and critical awareness (Fedeli & Olatunji, 2024). This approach shows how learning Bahasa Indonesia can be a space for profound transformation of understanding and values. In the context of global policy, this learning model is relevant to UNESCO's direction in *Futures of Education* which carries pedagogical innovation that is adaptive, sustainable, and oriented towards lifelong learning as well as *Global Citizenship Education* which instills humanitarian values and social responsibility (Mohanty et al., 2024). Thus, the learning practices implemented at SMP Muhammadiyah 1 Makassar are a concrete example of the integration of local and global values that are greatly needed in developing countries.

The practical implications are also very significant for the development of teacher professionalism globally. This study confirms the findings regarding the importance of teacher training and mentoring in mastering effective reflective and character learning, as well as digital literacy and innovative pedagogy. In other words, the world's education system must increasingly focus on increasing the capacity of teachers as facilitators who are able to integrate cognitive, emotional, and moral aspects in learning. In addition, this study makes an important contribution to the discourse *localization* global education, where the adaptation of global values into local cultural contexts is the key to the success of meaningful and contextual education (Burn & Menter, 2021). The *glocalisation* approach places Indonesian language learning as a medium for instilling character based on local culture, while also preparing

students to face global challenges, which is a very relevant model.

Finally, from the perspective of contemporary critical pedagogy (Giroux & Bosio, 2021), these findings underline that education is not merely a transfer of knowledge, but rather a liberating process that fosters critical consciousness and the capacity for social action for just and sustainable social change. With the integration *deep learning* and character education, learning Indonesian not only improves academic results, but also forms students' critical, reflective, and empowered characters (Zhang et al., 2023). Therefore, this learning model is not only relevant locally and nationally but also has great potential as an innovative educational paradigm on a global scale.

## Conclusion

Thus it can be concluded that integrating strategies *deep learning* with character education in learning Indonesian language is not only an innovative approach, but also transformative. The learning process is no longer merely oriented to the cognitive aspect, but also helps to bring to life the affective and moral dimensions of students. Through the use of literary texts as a reflective medium, students are encouraged not only to understand the structure and content of the text, but also to interpret the ethical messages contained therein, relate them to personal experiences, and build a deeper awareness of values. The result is a participatory, contextual, and meaningful learning atmosphere—which ultimately forms students who are reflective, empathetic, and able to think critically.

An important contribution of this research lies in the development of an integrative pedagogical model that combines *deep learning* and character education within the framework of the Independent Curriculum. This model not only bridges academic achievement and personality formation but also provides concrete examples of contextual and transformative learning practices in the classroom. These findings emphasize the need for ongoing teacher training, the preparation of value-focused lesson plans, and the strengthening of reflective learning strategies as an integral part of the educational process. Therefore, this study not only contributes to the development of educational practices at the local level, but also enriches the global discourse on the importance of building a humanistic learning system that is oriented towards the formation of students' character as a whole.

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