



Pragmatic Perspectives on Teacher-Child Interaction in Religio-Cultural Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

Early Childhood Education is a formative stage in children's cognitive, social, and moral development, where teacher-child interaction contributes not only to learning outcomes but also to the internalization of cultural and religious values. In pesantren-based educational settings, these interactions are shaped by local traditions and Islamic norms. This study aims to explore the pragmatic dimensions of teacher-child interaction in a pesantren-affiliated kindergarten in Babakan, Ciwaringin, Cirebon, an area recognized for its strong Islamic educational heritage. A qualitative descriptive approach was applied. Data were collected through classroom observations, audio recordings, and semi-structured interviews with teachers. The data were transcribed and analysed using frameworks from speech act theory, politeness theory, and conversational implicature to identify the forms and functions of teacher communication. The findings show that directive speech acts are the most dominant, reflecting the teacher's central role in classroom management, moral guidance, and ritual instruction. Expressive and representative speech acts are frequently used to provide praise, encouragement, and knowledge, while commissive and declarative acts, though less common, perform important pedagogical and spiritual functions, such as shaping discipline and reinforcing religious practices. This research contributes to pragmatics by extending its application to religio-cultural education and offers insights for educators and policymakers in designing communication strategies that are both effective and culturally responsive.

Abstrak

Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini (PAUD) merupakan tahap pembentukan penting dalam perkembangan kognitif, sosial, dan moral anak, di mana interaksi guru-anak tidak hanya berkontribusi pada hasil belajar, tetapi juga pada internalisasi nilai budaya dan religius. Dalam konteks pendidikan berbasis pesantren, interaksi tersebut dibentuk oleh tradisi lokal dan norma Islam. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengeksplorasi dimensi pragmatik dalam interaksi guru-anak di sebuah taman kanak-kanak yang berafiliasi dengan pesantren di Babakan, Ciwaringin, Cirebon, sebuah wilayah yang dikenal dengan kuatnya tradisi pendidikan Islam. Pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif digunakan dalam penelitian ini. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi kelas, rekaman audio, dan wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan guru. Data ditranskripsi dan dianalisis menggunakan kerangka teori tindak tutur, teori kesantunan, dan implikatur percakapan untuk mengidentifikasi bentuk dan fungsi komunikasi guru. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa tindak tutur direktif paling dominan, mencerminkan peran sentral guru dalam pengelolaan kelas, pembimbingan moral, dan pengajaran ritual. Tindak tutur ekspresif dan representatif sering digunakan untuk memberikan pujian, dorongan, dan pengetahuan, sementara tindak tutur komisif dan deklaratif, meskipun lebih jarang, menjalankan fungsi pedagogis dan spiritual penting, seperti membentuk disiplin dan memperkuat praktik keagamaan. Implikasinya menekankan pentingnya kesadaran pragmatik dalam PAUD, khususnya di lingkungan berbasis agama. Studi ini memperluas penerapan pragmatik ke pendidikan religio-kultural dan menawarkan wawasan bagi pendidik serta pembuat kebijakan dalam merancang strategi komunikasi yang efektif dan responsif budaya.

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education (ECE) is often referred to as the “golden age” because it plays a decisive role in shaping children’s cognitive, social, emotional, linguistic, and spiritual development (UNESCO, 2021). During this formative stage, interaction between teachers and children becomes a fundamental aspect of the learning process, as it is not limited to the transmission of knowledge but also encompasses value internalization, identity construction, and the development of children’s worldview (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010; Edwards, 2018). In Indonesia, the number of children enrolled in ECE programs has reached more than 13 million, highlighting the critical need to ensure that pedagogical approaches not only enhance cognitive skills but also nurture socio-cultural and spiritual values (Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2020). Through their utterances, teachers function as both educators and role models whose language serves not only an instructional purpose but also a moral and cultural one.

From a linguistic perspective, this interaction can be studied through the lens of pragmatics, which is concerned with meaning in relation to context (Levinson, 1983). Pragmatics examines how language is used to perform actions (speech acts), how relationships are maintained through politeness strategies, and how implied meanings are conveyed through implicature (Grice, 1975; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Searle, 1979). In classroom discourse, teachers’ language choices; whether directive, expressive, or commissive, carry pragmatic weight, as they influence not only children’s comprehension but also their attitudes and behaviors (Yule, 2020; Ishihara & Cohen, 2014). Pragmatic competence in the ECE setting is therefore crucial, as it guides how children learn to interpret meaning beyond literal words, negotiate relationships, and participate in culturally appropriate communication.

The religio-cultural setting of pesantren-based kindergartens provides a unique environment for examining such interactions. Situated in Islamic boarding school communities, these institutions embed religious values and local cultural practices into daily activities. Teachers frequently combine Indonesian with local languages such as Javanese or Sundanese, and integrate Islamic expressions; greetings, prayers, invocations, into classroom discourse (Rahman, 2019; Zamzami, 2020). This pragmatic practice serves not only to instruct but also to inculcate politeness, spirituality, and communal identity. The interplay between local culture and religious norms enriches the linguistic repertoire available to both teachers and children, creating a layered communication system that is pragmatically complex and socially meaningful.

Previous research has underscored the role of teacher–child communication in fostering socio-emotional growth (Ceka & Murati, 2016), enhancing learning motivation (Alisinanoglu & Kesicioglu, 2010), and transmitting cultural values (Edwards, 2018). In the Indonesian context, Musthafa (2018) emphasized curriculum design in ECE, while Rahman (2019) explored the use of religious language in Islamic schools. From a pragmatic perspective, Oktavia (2021) revealed that directive speech acts dominate kindergarten discourse, reflecting teachers’ central role in managing classroom interaction. However, while these studies highlight the importance of communication, few explicitly integrate pragmatic theories to analyze the religio-cultural dimensions of ECE.

Several research gaps therefore remain. First, existing literature often prioritizes cognitive and curricular aspects of early childhood education, leaving pragmatic dimensions of communication underexplored (Musthafa, 2018). Second, while studies on Islamic education describe the role of

religious expressions, they rarely ground their findings in pragmatic theory (Rahman, 2019). Third, pragmatic analyses of Indonesian kindergartens tend to focus on secular or general contexts (Oktavia, 2021), with minimal attention to pesantren-based settings where language use is deeply tied to religiosity and local culture. Addressing these gaps requires an investigation that combines pragmatic theory with the socio-religious dynamics of pesantren communities.

To fill this gap, this study investigates teacher–child interaction in a kindergarten located in Babakan, Ciwaringin, Cirebon, a well-known pesantren hub in Indonesia that hosts hundreds of Islamic boarding schools and attracts students nationwide. The religio-cultural environment of this community significantly shapes communication: teachers routinely embed Islamic greetings such as *assalamu’alaikum*, employ formulaic prayers before and after activities, and use culturally grounded politeness markers that guide children’s behavior. Analyzing this discourse through the frameworks of speech act theory (Searle, 1979), politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), and conversational implicature (Grice, 1975) offers valuable insights into how pragmatic practices foster moral, spiritual, and cultural development among young children.

This study aims to 1) Analyze the types of speech acts employed by teachers in their interaction with children in pesantren-based kindergartens in Babakan, Ciwaringin, Cirebon. 2) Identify politeness strategies utilized by teachers in delivering instructions, guidance, and values to children. 3) Examine pragmatic implications of teacher; child interaction for the internalization of socio-religious and cultural values in early childhood education.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the field of pragmatics by extending its application to religio-cultural early childhood education. It demonstrates how speech acts, politeness strategies, and implicatures operate in contexts where religion and local culture are central to the communicative process. Practically, the findings are expected to benefit teachers, ECE practitioners, and policymakers by informing the development of communication strategies that are not only pedagogically effective but also pragmatically appropriate and culturally resonant. By situating pragmatic analysis in a pesantren-based kindergarten, this study offers a novel contribution that bridges linguistic theory with socio-religious educational practice in Indonesia.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research adopted a qualitative descriptive design with a pragmatic discourse analysis approach to capture the dynamics of teacher–child interactions in early childhood classrooms. The qualitative framework was considered the most suitable because it enables the researcher to explore the complexity of language use, particularly the pragmatic strategies employed in classroom communication, in a manner that quantitative methods would not adequately capture. Pragmatic discourse analysis was applied to uncover not only the structural aspects of language but also the meanings embedded in social and cultural contexts, especially within religio-cultural educational settings.

The study was conducted in two early childhood education institutions (*Taman Kanak-kanak*) located in Babakan, Ciwaringin, Cirebon, West Java, Indonesia. This location was deliberately chosen because it represents a unique socio-cultural environment where Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) dominate the surrounding community. The dense concentration of pesantren in Babakan creates a religio-cultural ecosystem in which educational practices are deeply intertwined

with Islamic traditions, values, and local culture. Such a setting provides fertile ground for analyzing how religio-cultural dimensions shape communication patterns between teachers and young children. The participants consisted of four teachers, aged between 28 and 45 years, who were purposively selected due to their extensive involvement in classroom activities and their explicit incorporation of religio-cultural values into their pedagogy. Around 40 children, aged four to six years, were naturally involved in the study as participants in classroom discourse, as their daily interactions with teachers constituted the primary source of data. All participation was voluntary, and ethical protocols were strictly observed, including the acquisition of parental consent and the assurance of anonymity.

Data collection was carried out over a three-month period from March to May 2025. Three complementary techniques were employed to ensure the richness of the dataset. First, non-participant classroom observation was conducted to record authentic interactions during teaching and learning activities. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the teachers to gain insights into their perspectives on language use, communication strategies, and the integration of religio-cultural values into teaching practices. Third, document analysis was undertaken by reviewing lesson plans, instructional materials, and school guidelines, which provided contextual information on how religio-cultural orientations were institutionally embedded in teaching practices. The combination of these three data sources enhanced the robustness of the study and allowed for methodological triangulation.

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which consists of three cyclical steps: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. In the first stage, classroom recordings and field notes were transcribed and subjected to coding, with attention directed to utterances that reflected pragmatic functions such as directive speech acts, politeness markers, and culturally situated expressions. The second stage involved organizing the coded data into thematic categories that highlighted the interplay between pragmatic strategies and religio-cultural values. These categories were systematically displayed in matrices to facilitate comparison and pattern recognition. The final stage was conclusion drawing and verification, where preliminary interpretations were refined through repeated analysis and cross-checking against the data. In addition, key pragmatic theories, such as speech act theory and politeness theory, provided the analytical lens for interpreting the communicative practices observed. The iterative process of analysis ensured that interpretations remained grounded in the data while simultaneously connected to broader theoretical frameworks.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Speech Acts in Teacher-Child Interaction

The analysis revealed that speech acts were central to the structure of classroom interaction in the pesantren-based kindergarten. Based on Searle's (1979) framework, five categories of speech acts were identified: directives, expressives, representatives, commissives, and declaratives.

Directives (56%) emerged as the most dominant form of speech act, underscoring the teacher's central role in structuring classroom activities. Teachers frequently issued instructions, such as "please line up before we pray" or "repeat after me," reflecting both pedagogical necessity and cultural expectations of discipline. In this setting, directives not only guided behavior but also

reinforced religious practices -such as instructing children to recite daily prayers or respond with Islamic greetings. This finding illustrates how directives intertwine educational and moral functions, shaping children's conduct while embedding religiocultural values.

Expressives (18%) were the second most frequent category, often used to provide encouragement and emotional reinforcement. Teachers expressed joy when children successfully completed tasks, saying "good job" or "Alhamdulillah, you did it well," blending affective support with religious expression. Expressives played a critical role in maintaining children's motivation, creating a nurturing classroom climate that values both achievement and spiritual growth. Unlike directives, expressives highlight the teacher's empathetic role, balancing authority with emotional closeness.

Representatives (12%) occurred primarily when teachers presented information, confirmed understanding, or retold stories. In religiocultural PAUD contexts, representatives were frequently employed to narrate moral and religious tales, such as stories of the prophets, or to explain daily practices like the significance of saying *bismillah* before activities. These acts established shared knowledge and fostered a sense of collective identity rooted in Islamic tradition. The use of representatives also ensured children's cognitive development was closely aligned with cultural and religious literacy.

Commissives (8%) appeared in the form of promises and commitments to future actions. Teachers often assured children of rewards, such as "tomorrow we will sing together again" or "if you finish this, we will go outside later." In this sense, commissives were motivational tools, helping to sustain engagement and manage expectations. Within the religiocultural framework, commissives also reflected the teacher's effort to model trustworthiness (*amanah*), a key moral value in Islamic education.

Declaratives (6%), although the least frequent, held significant symbolic weight. These were observed primarily in ritualized settings, such as opening and closing classroom sessions with formal prayers or greetings. Through declaratives, teachers transformed classroom activities into religiously infused practices, such as declaring "let us begin with prayer" or "we close today's lesson with *hamdalah*." The presence of declaratives reveals how language functions as a performative act that establishes spiritual authority and sanctifies educational routines.

Table 1. Speech Acts in Teacher-Child Interaction

No	Speech Act Type	Example in Indonesia	English Translation	Function in Context	Frequency
1	Directive	"Ayo, duduk melingkar, kita mulai doa."	"Let's sit in a circle, we will start with a prayer."	Organizing classroom and embedding religious routine	56%
2	Expressive	"MasyaAllah! pinter sekali kamu bisa hafal doa makan."	"Glory be to God! you are very smart to memorize the prayer before eating."	Praising and reinforcing religiosity	18%
3	Representative	"Hari ini kita	"Today we	Presenting	12%

No	Speech Act Type	Example in Indonesia	English Translation	Function in Context	Frequency
4	Commissive	belajar tentang Nabi Nuh.”	are learning about Prophet Noah.”	knowledge and transmitting values	8%
		“Kalau rajin ikut, besok ustadzah kasih stiker bintang.”	“If you participate well, tomorrow I’ll give you a star sticker.”	Motivating children through promises	
5	Declarative	“Dengan membaca basmalah, kita mulai belajar.”	“By reciting bismillah, we begin our lesson.”	Ritualized opening/closing speech act	6%

Source: Authors’ analysis of research data

Teachers employed a range of politeness strategies that reflected both universal politeness principles (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and local religio-cultural norms. Positive politeness strategies were most dominant, as teachers sought to create solidarity and closeness with children. They used affectionate address terms (*sayang, nak, dek*) and inclusive pronouns (*ayo kita* – “let’s”) to foster a sense of belonging. For instance, “*Ayo, kita sama-sama baca doa, nak*” (“Come on, let’s recite the prayer together, dear”) illustrates how positive politeness was combined with religious practice. Negative politeness strategies were observed in instances where teachers softened directives to avoid imposing too strongly. For example, instead of commanding directly, teachers used interrogative forms like “*Bisa taruh mainannya di tempat, ya?*” (“Can you put the toy back, okay?”). Such mitigated requests helped maintain classroom harmony and modeled respectful interaction. Religious expressions themselves often served as politeness markers. Greetings such as *assalamu’alaikum*, formulaic phrases like *bismillah* (in the name of God), and blessings such as *insyaAllah* (God willing) framed communication within a spiritual ethos. These pragmatic features cultivated an atmosphere of mutual respect, humility, and piety.

The first objective of this study was to identify the forms of speech acts used by teachers in early childhood classrooms. The findings revealed five categories: directives (56 percent), expressives (18 percent), representatives (12 percent), commissives (8 percent), and declaratives (6 percent). The dominance of directives reflects the teacher’s role in managing learning activities and guiding children who require explicit instruction at an early stage of development. This finding is consistent with studies emphasizing that directive language is central to maintaining order and ensuring task completion in preschool education (Searle, 1979; Saville-Troike, 2003). The presence of other speech act types indicates that teacher talk is not limited to instruction but also incorporates affective, cognitive, and ritual functions.

Pragmatic Implications for Socio-Religious and Cultural Internalization

The pragmatic practices in teacher–child interaction had profound implications for the internalization of values among children. *First*, the frequent use of Islamic expressions reinforced children’s awareness of religiosity in everyday life. Teachers encouraged children to say *bismillah*

before activities, *alhamdulillah* after completing tasks, and *assalamu'alaikum* when greeting peers. These practices not only shaped children's linguistic habits but also cultivated a mindset in which language and faith were inseparable.

Second, local cultural politeness forms (e.g., Javanese honorifics and respectful particles) were introduced into classroom interaction, embedding norms of deference and humility within communication. This nurtured children's socio-pragmatic competence, preparing them to navigate broader community life with sensitivity to local values.

Third, the combination of directives with politeness strategies demonstrated a balance between authority and care. Rather than exercising rigid control, teachers used pragmatically nuanced language to discipline, guide, and motivate children in ways that respected their agency. This approach helped children internalize values such as cooperation, respect for elders, and responsibility in a culturally grounded manner. Overall, these findings suggest that teacher-child interaction in pesantren-based kindergartens is not merely pedagogical but also constitutes a pragmatic curriculum of values. Through speech acts, politeness strategies, and implicatures, teachers transmit religiosity, cultural identity, and moral conduct in ways that children can internalize naturally through daily practice.

The second research objective was to analyze how these speech acts function pragmatically within the religiocultural classroom setting. Expressive speech acts revealed the teacher's role in nurturing children's emotional well-being by offering praise, encouragement, and reassurance, aligning with socio-emotional learning frameworks (Hyland & Zou, 2022). Representatives functioned to transmit factual knowledge and retell religious stories, reflecting the integration of cultural and moral education in classroom practice (Duranti, 1997). Commissives strengthened trust by signaling future commitments, fostering security and anticipation among children (Austin, 1962). Declaratives, though less frequent, carried symbolic weight by structuring ritualized practices such as prayers at the beginning and end of lessons, embedding cultural identity into daily routines. Taken together, these functions illustrate how teacher talk is not merely instructional but also serves to build a holistic environment that combines learning, emotional support, and value transmission.

Pedagogical Implications in Religio-Cultural Early Childhood Education

The third objective was to examine the implications of speech act distribution for pedagogical practice. The heavy reliance on directives ensures classroom order but also raises concerns about limiting children's autonomy and active participation. Integrating more representatives and expressive could encourage dialogic interaction and support child-centered pedagogy, which is essential in fostering critical thinking and confidence (Mercer & Howe, 2012). The pragmatic use of commissive and declaratives further shows that language functions as a bridge between pedagogy and cultural identity, particularly in pesantren-based early childhood education, where religious values are embedded in daily learning activities. This highlights the need for teacher training that sensitizes educators to the multifunctional roles of speech acts and encourages a more balanced communicative repertoire.

In addition, the pragmatic use of commissive and declarative speech acts demonstrates how language serves as a bridge between pedagogy and cultural identity. In pesantren-based early

childhood education, language does not merely deliver academic content but also mediates the transmission of religious values, discipline, and communal norms. Through declaratives, teachers legitimize ritual practices and institutional expectations, while commissives model moral commitment and obedience to shared beliefs.

These findings underscore the importance of teacher training that enhances pragmatic awareness and equips educators with a more varied communicative repertoire. Rather than abandoning directives, teachers can adopt a balanced approach that combines instructional clarity with participatory dialogue and value-based expression. Such a shift would not only support holistic child development but also ensure that the cultural and religious functions of language are maintained without compromising children's voice and agency.

The analysis shows that teachers' pragmatic strategies are not limited to pedagogical functions but also serve to internalize socio-religious and cultural values. Through greetings, prayers, politeness markers, and narrative traditions rooted in the pesantren environment, communication becomes a medium for transmitting spirituality and community identity to children. These findings confirm that pragmatic practices in early childhood education extend beyond language learning, shaping moral and cultural development in ways that are deeply contextualized.

CONCLUSION

The findings reveal that directive speech acts are the most dominant form of communication, reflecting the teacher's central role in guiding and managing classroom activities. Expressive and representative acts also play a significant role, demonstrating how teachers use language to provide encouragement, convey knowledge, and nurture children's emotional development. Meanwhile, commissive and declarative acts, although less frequent, contribute to strengthening children's sense of trust, discipline, and spiritual grounding within the religio-cultural context. The results highlight the importance of teacher training programs that emphasize not only instructional techniques but also pragmatic sensitivity to context. Teacher-child interaction in pesantren-based kindergartens represents a rich pragmatic site where language, culture, and religion converge. By analyzing these interactions, this study sheds light on the integral role of communication in shaping children's cognitive, moral, and spiritual development.

However, this study has limitations, particularly in its focus on a single pesantren-based kindergarten. Broader studies across diverse early childhood education contexts in Indonesia would provide a more comprehensive understanding of pragmatic variation. Future research could also explore children's responses more systematically, investigating how they internalize and reproduce pragmatic norms in peer interaction. While the study provides valuable insights, it is limited to a single kindergarten in Babakan, Ciwaringin, Cirebon. The findings may not be generalizable across different cultural or institutional settings. Future research should include comparative studies across multiple religiocultural contexts, integrate multimodal analyses, and explore the perspectives of children to better understand how they interpret and respond to teachers' speech acts.

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Vol. 11 No. 2. October 2025 Page 91 – 100

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