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From Classroom to Diplomacy: Reflections on BIPA Teaching by Timorese Teachers



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ABSTRACT (9 pt)

Objective: This study aims to explore the experiences of local educators in teaching Indonesian as a Foreign Language (BIPA) in Timor-Leste, specifically at two educational institutions: Escola Secundaria Geral (ESG) and Escola Técnica Vocacional (ESTV). Employing a reflective qualitative approach with a collective case study design, the research involved six active teachers as its primary subjects. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, open-ended questionnaires, and analysis of instructional documents, and were subsequently examined using thematic coding and narrative reflection. The findings reveal that teachers developed task-based learning strategies, culturally relevant media, and contextual approaches despite facing structural limitations. Lesson plans generally demonstrated moderate alignment with Graduate Competency Standards (SKL), yet required improvement in goal formulation, cultural integration, and rubric-based assessment. This study foregrounds teachers' voices as vital sources of curricular knowledge, shifting the focus from macro-level policy to reflective classroom practice. Consequently, BIPA is positioned not merely as a language teaching initiative, but as a form of soft diplomacy that strengthens bilateral relations between Indonesia and Timor-Leste through intercultural education.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, the Indonesian language has acquired growing symbolic, educational, and functional value in Timor-Leste. Despite the formal political separation between the two nations in 2002, cultural and linguistic ties remain resilient, rooted in shared historical experiences and geographic proximity. In this context, Bahasa Indonesia serves not only as a medium of informal communication but also as an aspirational language linked to academic mobility, regional integration, and professional advancement. (Sudarmanto et al., 2025) highlight its dominance in border regions, shaped by colonial legacies, cultural proximity, and cross border kinship ties. Meanwhile, draws attention to the limited public representation of local languages such as Tetun and Dawan, despite their sustained use in everyday interactions. This

linguistic imbalance reflects broader tensions in identity formation and language policy. At the same time, multilingual education frameworks promoted by UNESCO and UNICEF (2025, p. 2) emphasize the integration of mother tongues into formal curricula as a means of fostering inclusion and preserving cultural heritage. By foregrounding the interplay between language, identity, and educational policy, this section establishes a theoretical and contextual foundation that positions teachers' voices as central to the development of intercultural and contextually responsive language education.

According to research by (Ximenes, P. B, 2025.) Indonesian is used as a working and instructional language in several higher education institutions in Timor-Leste, although not all universities offer specific Indonesian language courses. Furthermore, Indonesia's cultural diplomacy programs in education and culture implemented by the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Indonesian Embassy in Dili from 2016 to 2023 demonstrate a strong commitment to expanding the influence of the Indonesian language in Timor-Leste (Gurning et al., 2024). The Bahasa Indonesia for Foreign Speakers (BIPA) program organized by the Language Agency in 2024 reflects the growing sociolinguistic relevance of Bahasa Indonesia in Timor-Leste. The language functions not only as a tool for informal communication but also as a medium for educational mobility and intercultural engagement. The program recorded active participation from diverse societal groups, including university students, security personnel, and local educators indicating a strong interest in acquiring Bahasa Indonesia for academic, professional, and diplomatic purposes. Support from strategic figures such as Ambassador Okto Darius Manik and Education Attaché Prof. Ikhfan Haris further reinforces the program's position as an instrument of Indonesia's cultural diplomacy.

As part of Indonesia's broader strategy for the internationalization of its language and culture, the BIPA program is also designed to expand cross-national institutional networks, integrate local cultural content into the curriculum, and provide language training and certification for foreign participants (Simanullang et al., 2024). This initiative aligns with Indonesia's soft diplomacy policy, which aims to strengthen linguistic ties, foster mutual understanding, and promote regional integration through language education (BOOKLET BIPA Universitas Airlangga, Simanullang et al., 2024.)

The sociolinguistic landscape of Timor-Leste is marked by linguistic pluralism, where Tetun and Portuguese function as official languages alongside various local languages such as Mambae, Makasae, and Fataluku. Although Portuguese holds formal institutional status, its practical acquisition among younger generations remains limited. In contrast, Indonesian is easily accessible through media, music, television broadcasts, and interpersonal interactions providing a more familiar and comprehensible linguistic alternative for many learners (Susana Alfonso, 2012). This accessibility has positioned Indonesian as a de facto auxiliary language, especially in border areas and urban centers where exposure to Indonesian culture and resources is higher.

Teaching Indonesian as a foreign language (TIFL) is becoming increasingly relevant in Timor-Leste, in line with the growing need for cross-border communication and regional cooperation. The BIPA program serves as the formal framework for TIFL, focusing not only on linguistic aspects but also on communicative competence, cultural

understanding, and intercultural sensitivity. Recent studies (Tiawati et al., 2024) highlight BIPA's role as a cultural diplomacy instrument that fosters socio-political harmony and strengthens Indonesia-Timor-Leste relations. Institutional support from the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Indonesian Embassy in Dili has facilitated the deployment of BIPA instructors and the enhancement of learning evaluation systems. Despite challenges such as the absence of a standardized curriculum and limited resources, local educators have demonstrated innovation through contextualized approaches and the use of authentic media, positioning BIPA as a strategic bridge for intercultural dialogue in Southeast Asia.

Specifically, the BIPA program represents a key component of Indonesia's contemporary soft power diplomacy strategy, where language functions as a bridge to expand influence, strengthen bilateral relations, and promote regional integration. Recent studies and policy analyses (Wibowo, 2025; Nuaba, 2025) emphasize that BIPA is no longer merely a linguistic initiative but a strategic cultural instrument embedded in Indonesia's foreign policy agenda. The development of BIPA Graduate Competency Standards particularly Levels 1 and 2 has been refined to align with global benchmarks such as the CEFR and Indonesia's National Qualification Framework (KKNI), aiming to standardize learning outcomes for foreign speakers (APPBIPA, 2023; Language Center UNRAM, 2025). However, while these standards are nationally endorsed, their practical implementation in Timor-Leste remains highly dependent on local educators navigating complex realities marked by limited resources, diverse learner profiles, and minimal institutional infrastructure. In this context, teacher agency and contextual adaptation become crucial in ensuring that BIPA functions not only as a pedagogical tool but also as a vehicle for intercultural dialogue and regional cohesion.

Unlike Indonesia or other countries with formal BIPA centers, BIPA instruction in Timor-Leste is often grassroots-driven, improvisational, and deeply reliant on the dedication of local educators. Many of these teachers are alumni of Indonesian universities or self-trained, and they serve as cultural mediators and instructional designers in their communities. Recent studies (Rejeki & Asari, 2019) highlight how these educators develop their own materials, adapt lessons to diverse learner needs, and craft innovative teaching strategies—often without access to structured training, standardized curricula, or institutional support. Despite these constraints, their pedagogical creativity such as task-based learning and the use of authentic, culturally rooted media has enriched BIPA's role as a tool for intercultural dialogue and soft power diplomacy. This informal yet impactful TIFL model offers valuable insights into how language education evolves at the community level and how educators respond adaptively to complex teaching realities.

In this context, there is an urgent need to document, analyze, and reflect on the lived experiences of these teachers. Their perspectives are essential not only for understanding local conditions but also for providing valuable lessons that can inform curriculum design, teacher training, and future BIPA program development in postcolonial and multilingual societies. As emphasized by Taba (1962) in Gallimore (2020), curriculum development must be rooted in contextual understanding and based on the direct experiences of practitioners closest to the learners.

Therefore, ⁴⁸ this study aims to explore the experiences of Timorese educators in teaching BIPA and contribute to TIFL practices from a bottom up perspective. This chapter synthesizes field observations, teacher reflections, and practical strategies applied in real classroom settings. Its goal is to provide a picture of how BIPA is taught, shaped, and sustained in educational environments that are challenging yet full of hope.

This study aims to illuminate the pedagogical reflections of local BIPA practitioners in Timor-Leste, capturing nuanced insights into effective strategies, persistent challenges, and evolving practices in the teaching of Bahasa Indonesia. Rather than critiquing the national BIPA framework, the research seeks to contribute grassroots perspectives that may inform ⁴⁹ more adaptive, inclusive, and contextually grounded approaches to Teaching Indonesian as a Foreign Language (TIFL). Situated within a complex nexus of historical, linguistic, and educational dynamics, the study responds to an urgent need to foreground practitioner voices as a vital source of curricular knowledge. In this context, teacher reflections are positioned not only as authentic expressions of lived experience but also as strategic inputs for designing sustainable and locally responsive language education. (Abdullah & Gani, 2022) underscore the critical role of teacher agency in curriculum development, advocating for pedagogical models that align with learners' sociocultural realities. Concurrently, multilingual education policies promoted by UNESCO and UNICEF (2025) emphasize the integration of mother tongues into formal instruction as a means to enhance educational inclusion, learner retention, and cultural continuity. Employing a qualitative methodology that privileges narrative depth and participatory engagement, this research expands the scope of BIPA scholarship in Southeast Asia and proposes a conceptual framework that supports intercultural understanding, educational equity, and soft diplomacy through language.

Teacher agency, cultural adaptability, and contextual responsiveness are essential components in the success of BIPA programs in Timor-Leste. Educators' ability to tailor instructional approaches to local conditions significantly influences the effectiveness of ⁵⁰ teaching Indonesian as a foreign language, particularly in multilingual and postcolonial contexts (Lutfiani et al., 2025; Damanik & Tambunan, 2025.) Cultural adaptability in BIPA pedagogy is increasingly vital in multilingual and postcolonial contexts, with recent studies highlighting how integrating multicultural literature and pluricultural competence into curricula fosters intercultural understanding (Astoria et al., 2025) Simultaneously, contextual teaching strategies aligned with national policies are shaped by linguistic mapping and reflective practice, enabling educators to adapt lesson plans to local realities while maintaining pedagogical agency (Khoirunnisa & Sauri, 2023) Documenting and analyzing local teacher experiences contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of TIFL and underscores the role of language education in strengthening international cooperation. This chapter presents both theoretical ⁵¹ reflections and practical contributions to the development of studies and practices in teaching Indonesian as a foreign language in developing and post-independence countries.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

How do local educators teach Indonesian as a foreign language (BIPA) in Timor-Leste within the context of limited resources, through pedagogical strategies, cultural adaptation, and curriculum contextualization?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

To explore the experiences of local educators in teaching BIPA in Timor-Leste, with a focus on pedagogical strategies, cultural adaptation, and curriculum contextualization in conditions of limited resources and institutional support.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a reflective qualitative approach to explore the experiences and cultural diplomacy practices of BIPA educators at two educational institutions in Timor-Leste, namely Escola Secundaria Geral (ESG) and Escola Técnica Vocacional (ESTV). This approach allows the researcher to understand meanings constructed through subjective experiences and critical reflection on social practices (Moleong, 2017: 6; Supriatna & Permatasari, 2025: 157). The participants consist of six teachers three men and three women purposively selected based on their active involvement in language instruction and intercultural engagement. This technique asserts that qualitative methods are designed to uncover rich, detailed insights rather than generalize findings statistically, making them especially suitable for educational and intercultural research, Sugiyono, (2022)

This study employed a qualitative approach, utilizing data collection techniques including classroom observation of BIPA sessions, open-ended questionnaires, and in-depth interviews. Direct observation was conducted to capture authentic teaching practices, while in-depth interviews were used to explore the personal reflections of educators. The open-ended questionnaires complemented these methods by providing participants with a structured space to articulate their views in writing. Together, these three techniques contributed to a holistic understanding of teaching practices and teacher experiences within the context of BIPA instruction in a post-independence nation.

Interview data were fully transcribed, and observation notes were systematically compiled. Data reduction was carried out by filtering information relevant to the research focus, ensuring that only meaningful and contextually grounded data were analyzed further. The coding process involved assigning thematic codes based on keywords, narrative patterns, and recurring issues within the reduced data. This coding aimed to organize the data systematically for thematic analysis and was conducted both manually and with the assistance of qualitative analysis software to maintain consistency and transparency.

Collaboration with sources referred to the triangulation process, which involved comparing findings from interviews, observations, and questionnaires to ensure the validity of the results. The researcher also engaged in clarification and open discussions with several participants to review initial interpretations, ensuring that the meanings derived genuinely reflected their lived experiences. The developed codes were then grouped into thematic categories such as pedagogical strategies, cultural adaptation, and teacher interaction, which formed the basis for the main interpretive themes.

The researcher also reflected on their positionality and methodological approach to reveal how their background and perspective influenced the analytical process. The

findings are presented in the form of thematic narratives supported by direct quotations from participants and are discussed in depth to highlight the educational and diplomatic implications of the study.

In thematic analysis, (Braun & Clarke, 2006) outline a six-phase process that offers a structured yet flexible framework for interpreting qualitative data. The analysis begins with familiarization, where researchers immerse themselves in the data to gain a deep understanding. This is followed by generating initial codes that capture essential features across the dataset. The third phase involves searching for potential themes, which are then reviewed to ensure coherence and alignment with the data. In the fifth phase, themes are clearly defined and named to encapsulate their core meaning. Finally, the sixth phase focuses on producing a well-structured report that integrates the themes into a compelling narrative, linking findings to research questions and theoretical contexts.

1. **Data Collection** The initial stage involved in-depth interviews with BIPA instructors and direct classroom observations. The interviews aimed to uncover teachers' personal reflections and professional experiences, while the observations captured authentic teaching practices and learner interactions within the classroom. These techniques were employed to gather rich, contextual data on the dynamics of teaching Bahasa Indonesia as a foreign language in Timor-Leste.
2. **Transcription and Data Reduction** Interview data were fully transcribed, and observation notes were systematically compiled. Data reduction was conducted by selecting information relevant to the research focus—namely pedagogical practices, cultural adaptation, and teachers' contextual responses. This process ensured that only meaningful and in-depth data were retained for further analysis.
3. **Data Coding** Data coding referred to the process of assigning thematic codes to segments of data based on keywords, narrative patterns, and recurring issues. During this stage, the researcher marked significant portions of interview transcripts and observation notes that contained reflective meaning. Coding also involved a collaborative process, including triangulation across data sources (interviews and observations) and member checking with informants to validate initial interpretations.
4. **Categorization and Theme Development** Identified codes were grouped into thematic categories such as pedagogical strategies, cultural adaptation, and teacher interaction. Each category served as a foundation for formulating the main themes used in analysis and interpretation. These themes reflected conceptual patterns emerging from teachers' experiences and the dynamics of classroom learning.
5. **Researcher Reflexivity** The researcher engaged in reflective analysis by connecting theoretical frameworks with field experiences. This reflection encompassed the researcher's positionality, methodological approach, and understanding of the educational social reality. This step was essential to ensure analytical depth and transparency of perspective.
6. **Findings and Narrative Construction** The research findings were presented in the form of thematic narratives supported by direct quotations from participants. The researcher articulated the main themes and explicitly stated their analytical stance. Educational and diplomatic implications were also discussed to highlight the

relevance of the findings in strengthening cross-national collaboration through language education.

RESULT and DISCUSSION

Results

This research was conducted between March and April 2025. The activities began with an observation of the learning process in Timor-Leste. The observation took place in Class 2 STB, in the Accounting Department. The following are the results of the observation in that class..



Figure 1. Observation of the Learning Process in Class 2 Accounting.

Based on the observation, it was found that the BIBA learning process was too monotonous, resulting in students having difficulty understanding BIPA lessons. Therefore, students need to experience a more engaging and dynamic learning process. This research will take learners beyond the classroom and into the realm of diplomacy. Ultimately, it aims to ensure that language teaching in the classroom particularly BIPA has a broader impact, serving as a tool for cultural diplomacy and strengthening international relations.

An analysis of six Lesson Plans (RPP) prepared by BIPA instructors reveals a general tendency to fall within the *Moderately Aligned* category with respect to the Graduate Competency Standards (SKL), scoring between 15 and 22 out of a total of 28 indicators. Although instructional flow adheres to a structured sequence (opening → core → closing), the vertical integration between learning objectives, instructional activities, and assessments does not yet fully reflect a cohesive alignment with the SKL framework as outlined in the Ministry of Education and Culture Regulation No. 3 of 2020.



Figure 2. Interviews of the Learning Process in Class 2 Accounting.

Most of the lesson plans do not explicitly reference SKL codes (SKL-I), making it difficult to map graduate competencies and monitor achievement. The learning objectives are generally broad and have not been formulated using the SMART principles (*Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound*), which limits the design of precise and valid evaluations.

Instructional materials are contextually relevant for novice learners, particularly around topics such as greetings and self-introduction; however, they fall short in incorporating cultural values and cross-cultural competence, which are essential elements of the BIPA framework. While the communicative approach dominates the methodologies used, task-based language teaching (TBLT) and project-based learning (PBL) which could enhance learner engagement and functional language use have yet to be applied.

The learning media tend to be generic and lack explanation concerning their interactivity or relevance to specific language skills, such as listening or writing. Assessment strategies predominantly focus on speaking skills but are not supported by rubrics or well-defined indicators of success.

Overall, the lesson plans exhibit a promising foundational structure, yet there remains significant room for improvement in:

1. the formulation of SMART-aligned learning objectives clearly linked to SKL;
2. the integration of task- or project-based methodologies to promote learner autonomy and interaction;
3. and the strategic development of evaluations supported by rubrics and standard success criteria.

These findings serve as a critical basis for designing targeted recommendations to enhance BIPA lesson planning practices, ensuring greater coherence, cultural integration, and competency-based instructional delivery.

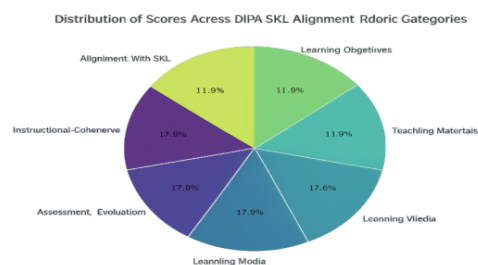


Figure 3. Distribution of Scores Across DIPA-SKL Alignment Rubric Categories"

The illustrates how emphasis is distributed across six key components of the BIPA lesson plan evaluation rubric. Three categories Alignment with SKL, Learning

Objectives, and Teaching Materials each account for 11.9% of the total score distribution, indicating a relatively modest weighting in the overall rubric. In contrast, Learning Media receives a higher share at 17.6%, while Assessment & Evaluation and Instructional Coherence are the most emphasized, each comprising 17.9% of the total. This distribution suggests that evaluators place greater importance on how lessons are assessed and how coherently they are structured, compared to their alignment with formal standards or the clarity of objectives and materials. The chart provides a useful snapshot of pedagogical priorities within the rubric framework, highlighting areas that may require more targeted support or development in future curriculum planning.

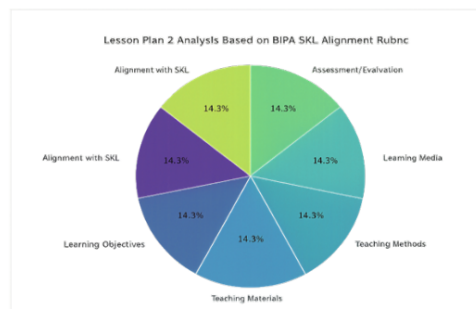


Figure 4. "Lesson Plan 2 Analysis Based on BIPA SKL Alignment Rubric"

The presents a balanced distribution across seven key rubric components, each occupying 14.3% of the total. The categories include Alignment with SKL, Assessment/Evaluation, Learning Media, Teaching Methods, Teaching Materials, and Learning Objectives with Alignment with SKL appearing twice, likely due to a labeling oversight.

This equal segmentation suggests that, in Lesson Plan 2, all components are treated with uniform importance. Unlike Lesson Plan 1, which showed varied emphasis across categories, this chart reflects a more standardized or holistic approach to rubric application. It may indicate either a deliberate effort to balance instructional design or a lack of differentiation in scoring. For curriculum developers, this could prompt reflection on whether equal weighting truly reflects pedagogical priorities or if certain elements like assessment or instructional coherence should be more prominently featured.

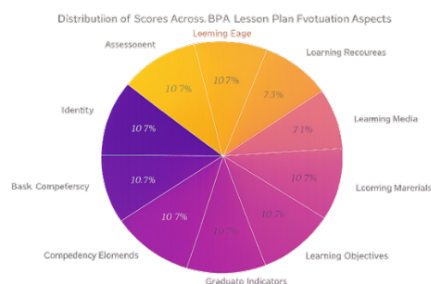


Figure 5. "Distribution of Scores Across BIPA Lesson Plan Evaluation Aspects"

The presents a breakdown of how different components are weighted in the evaluation of a lesson plan. Out of ten listed aspects, nine categories Learning Edge, Learning Materials, Learning Objectives, Graduate Indicators, Competency Elements, Basic Competency, Identity, and Assessment each receive 10.7%, indicating a balanced emphasis across core instructional and evaluative elements.

In contrast, Learning Resources and Learning Media are weighted slightly lower, at 7.3% and 7.1% respectively. This suggests that while these two aspects are considered in the evaluation, they may be viewed as supporting components rather than central pillars of instructional design.

Overall, the chart reflects a relatively even distribution of importance across most categories, with minor deviations that could inform future rubric refinement. It highlights the evaluators' intent to maintain

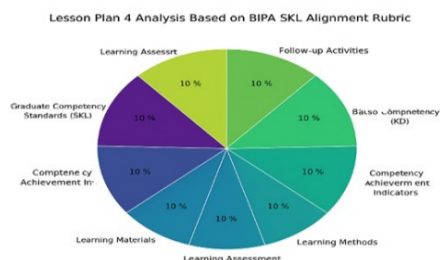


Figure 6. "Lesson Plan 4 Analysis Based on BIPA SKL Alignment Rubric"

The presents a balanced distribution across eight key components of lesson plan evaluation, with each category contributing 10% to the overall rubric. The components include Learning Assessment, Follow-up Activities, Basic Competency (KD), Competency Achievement Indicators, Learning Methods, Learning Materials, Competency Achievement In, and Graduate Competency Standards (SKL).

Competency Achievement Indicators, Learning Methods, Learning Assessment, Learning Materials, and Graduate Competency Standards (SKL).

This equal segmentation suggests a holistic approach to lesson planning, where each element is given uniform importance in aligning with BIPA’s SKL framework. The inclusion of both assessment and follow-up activities highlights attention to not only instructional delivery but also learner progression and reinforcement. The presence of Basic Competency and Graduate Competency Standards reflects a structured alignment with national benchmarks, while Learning Methods and Materials ensure pedagogical relevance.

Overall, the chart underscores a standardized rubric application, promoting consistency and comprehensive coverage in lesson plan evaluation. If you'd like, I can help synthesize this with previous lesson plan analyses to identify patterns or shifts in pedagogical emphasis.

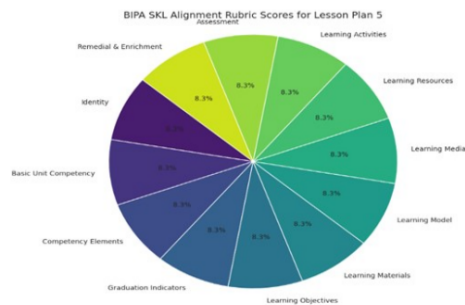


Figure 7. "BIPA SKL Alignment Rubric Scores for Lesson Plan 5"

The illustrates a perfectly balanced distribution across twelve instructional components, with each category contributing 8.3% to the overall rubric. The categories include Assessment, Learning Activities, Learning Resources, Learning Media, Learning Model, Learning Materials, Learning Objectives, Graduation Indicators, Competency Elements, Basic Unit Competency, Identity, and Remedial & Enrichment.

This equal weighting suggests a comprehensive and standardized approach to lesson plan evaluation, where no single component is prioritized over others. Such uniformity may reflect an effort to ensure holistic instructional design, emphasizing that each element from foundational competencies to enrichment strategies plays an equally vital role in aligning with BIPA’s Graduate Competency Standards (SKL).

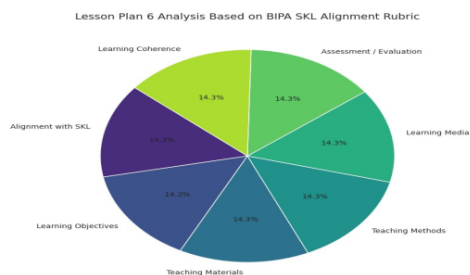


Figure 8. The analysis of Lesson Plan 6 reveals a balanced distribution of evaluation.

The alignment rubric. Each aspect namely Learning Coherence, Assessment/Evaluation, Learning Media, Teaching Methods, Teaching Materials, Learning Objectives, and Alignment with SKL receives an equal proportion of 14.3%.

This even distribution suggests that the lesson plan was designed with relatively equal attention to all core components of the learning process. No aspect stands out as significantly stronger or weaker, which may reflect an intentional effort to maintain equilibrium between planning, implementation, and assessment.

However, such uniformity also invites further reflection. Does this equality truly represent balanced quality across all aspects, or might it indicate a lack of differentiation in the evaluation process? To answer this question, actual scoring data and teacher reflections for each aspect are needed. This is essential to ensure the analysis moves beyond description and captures the nuanced strengths and areas for improvement within the lesson plan.

Overall, Lesson Plan 6 demonstrates a solid foundation in terms of structure and alignment with BIPA SKL. The next step is to explore the depth of quality in each aspect through both qualitative and quantitative evaluation, and to engage in dialogue with teachers' lived experiences in the classroom.

Qualitative Analysis Approach

To assess the quality of instructional design particularly within the BIPA curriculum and similar programs a qualitative analysis using thematic coding was conducted. This process aimed to identify and categorize key elements in instructional documents such as competencies (SKL), learning objectives, media, and evaluation, distinguishing between statements that are explicit and measurable versus those that remain general or minimal.

The analysis seeks to evaluate how well these elements align with sound instructional design principles, accommodate contextual and participatory approaches, and serve as a data-driven foundation for future improvements in lesson planning.

Summary Table of Lesson Plan (RPP) Evaluation

RPP	Score	Category	Key Features
1	17/28	Moderately Aligned	Objectives not SMART, SKL not explicitly stated
2	21/28	Aligned	Listening focus, good audio media, rubric incomplete
3	28/30	Highly Aligned	Critical thinking & culture, media lacks variety
4	30/30	Highly Aligned	TBLT approach, complete components
5	36/36	Highly Aligned	Local cultural context, highly interactive
6	21/28	Aligned	Listening focus, structured, evaluation needs improvement

DISCUSSION

An analysis of six BIPA lesson plans (RPP) in Timor-Leste reveals that these documents generally fulfill the formal components mandated by Indonesia's national curriculum, including Graduate Competency Standards (SKL), Basic Competencies (KD), and competency indicators (Rohmah, 2024; Sukma Eka Wijaya et al., 2024) elements ensure alignment between instructional goals and student learning outcomes. However, the pedagogical strength of an RPP lies not merely in its technical compliance, but in how teachers interpret and enact it through reflective practices rooted in their lived experiences and those of their students.

Teacher reflection is widely acknowledged as a critical dimension of professional development and instructional quality (Kolajo, 2025; Suphasri, 2021). In the Timor-Leste context, BIPA educators do more than design lesson plans; they cultivate learning environments that connect language instruction with the social realities of their learners. Instructional materials such as market activities, family interactions, and local customs are selected not arbitrarily, but through attentive observation of students' everyday lives. These choices reflect a commitment to making language learning relevant and resonant.

Thematic instruction, grounded in students' lived experiences, has emerged as a particularly effective approach to enhancing engagement and comprehension. By integrating multiple subjects around a central theme, this method strengthens motivation and facilitates deeper understanding through real-world connections (Kushnir, 2025; Mulyasari et al., 2025). As one teacher noted, "If the material isn't close to their experience, students just memorize it's not real understanding," underscoring the pedagogical imperative to align content with learners' realities. In a postcolonial setting like Timor-Leste, such approaches are not only educational but also political, positioning Bahasa Indonesia as a meaningful communicative tool rather than a symbolic imposition (Independent Education Consultant & Burns, 2017).

Assessment practices present ongoing challenges. Although attitudinal and pragmatic indicators are formally included in the RPPs, teachers report that existing instruments often fail to capture the subtleties of intercultural interaction. Rubrics developed by AAC&U (2024) offer more comprehensive frameworks for evaluating cultural awareness, communication styles, and social behaviors. Yet, teachers in Timor-Leste emphasize the need for more adaptive, experience-based assessment tools. One teacher remarked, “Assessing the attitudes of foreign students is complex. They’re polite, but their expressions are different,” highlighting the limitations of standardized rubrics in diverse classroom contexts.

Flexibility in teaching methods also emerged as a recurring theme in teacher reflections. While most RPPs adopt Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), educators frequently adjust their strategies in response to classroom dynamics and student preferences. TBLT promotes authentic language use through meaningful tasks and has been shown to foster communicative competence and learner autonomy (Chunliu et al., 2025; Tozcu, 2025). One teacher shared, “Sometimes I change the method mid-way, because students from Timor-Leste are more comfortable with group work than individual presentations,” illustrating the importance of pedagogical responsiveness to local learning cultures.

In addition, teachers emphasized the foundational role of clearly articulated Graduate Competency Standards (SKL) in designing purposeful instruction. In the absence of explicit SKL, teaching practices tend to become improvisational and inconsistent across educators. This concern aligns with the Ministry of Education and Culture’s guidelines, which assert that SKL should reflect measurable competencies in language, culture, and intercultural communication. Teachers in Timor-Leste view SKL not as a bureaucratic requirement, but as a strategic tool for guiding meaningful and coherent instruction.

Finally, the use of authentic, multilingual materials—such as regional songs, tourism brochures, and real-life conversation videos—has emerged as a powerful strategy to enhance learner engagement and deepen contextual understanding in BIPA instruction. Recent studies emphasize that multimodal materials, which integrate visual, auditory, and cultural elements, significantly enrich the learning experience and foster real-world language use (Zamzamy, 2021; Nurichsania et al., 2024). In Timor-Leste, BIPA educators carefully curate resources that are not only linguistically appropriate but also culturally resonant, often drawing from local contexts to create immersive and meaningful learning environments despite limited institutional support.

CONCLUSION

This study affirms that local teacher reflections in BIPA instruction in Timor-Leste serve as an authentic and transformative source of curriculum knowledge, where contextual, flexible, and experience-based approaches have proven to enhance pedagogical effectiveness while reinforcing the strategic function of language as a tool of soft diplomacy. These findings carry significant implications for BIPA curriculum development in postcolonial and multilingual contexts, particularly in promoting instructional designs that are culturally responsive, locally relevant, and sensitive to intercultural dynamics. However, the study is limited to two educational institutions and six key informants, with uneven access to national curriculum documents, making

the results less generalizable. Therefore, future research should expand its geographical scope, involve more stakeholders, and develop longitudinal studies on the impact of BIPA learning, including the advancement of assessment instruments that are adaptive and grounded in local experience.

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Gratitude is extended to the Indonesian language teachers for foreign speakers (BIPA) in Timor-Leste who generously shared their experiences, reflections, and instructional practices. Their dedication and innovation in sustaining Indonesian language education amid limited resources form the foundation of this study. Appreciation is also conveyed to the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Dili and the Center for Language Strengthening and Empowerment for their support in advancing BIPA programs across various regions of Timor-Leste. Deep thanks are also given to mentors and colleagues for their invaluable feedback and encouragement throughout the writing process.

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