

# Politeness in Kolok Bengkulu Sign Language: A Sociopragmatic Analysis of the Deaf Community

Anak Agung Ayu Dian Andriyani\*

Faculty of Foreign Languages, Universitas Mahasaraswati Denpasar, Denpasar, Indonesia

Ida Ayu Putri Gita Ardiantari

Faculty of Foreign Languages, Universitas Mahasaraswati Denpasar, Denpasar, Indonesia

Wiwik Yulianti

Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Sebelas Maret, Surakarta, Indonesia

Wisnu Giri

The Tourism Awareness Group (Pokdarwis) of Bengkulu Village, Indonesia

Kundharu Saddhono

Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Sebelas Maret, Surakarta, Indonesia

Aldi Dwi Saputra

Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Sebelas Maret, Surakarta, Indonesia

**Abstract**—Sign language plays an essential role as the primary medium of communication for the Deaf community while simultaneously reflecting the social and cultural values embedded within its users. In Bengkulu Village, Kolok Bengkulu Sign Language has developed naturally and is used by both Deaf and hearing residents in daily interactions. This study aims to reveal the forms and politeness strategies that emerge in interactions among the Deaf community in Bengkulu Village through the use of Kolok Bengkulu Sign Language (BIKK). Employing a qualitative approach with ethnographic methods, data were collected through observation, recording, and interviews with Kolok residents, hearing individuals proficient in BIKK, and members of the village's tourism awareness group (Pokdarwis). The analysis applies Brown and Levinson's politeness theory within a sociopragmatic framework. The findings show that politeness in BIKK is expressed through gestures, facial expressions, interactional distance, touch, and body movements, all of which are shaped by the local sociocultural context. The Kolok community employs positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record strategies, and bald-on-record strategies influenced by Balinese cultural values such as *menyama braya* and the harmony principle of *Tri Hita Karana*. These results indicate that politeness is not limited to verbal communication but also develops significantly within non-verbal communication systems. This study contributes to sociopragmatic research, sign language linguistics, and efforts to strengthen inclusivity in multilingual and multicultural societies.

**Index Terms**—Balinese culture, Kolok Sign Language, linguistic politeness, sociopragmatics

## I. INTRODUCTION

Language functions as a primary tool of communication in human life for building social interactions as well as reflecting the culture of its speakers (Andriyani et al., 2024; Kusumaningsih et al., 2024; Paramita et al., 2025). Spoken language is produced through speech organs and perceived auditorily, while sign language is produced through gestures, facial expressions, and body movements perceived visually, and is used by Deaf communities as their medium of communication (Othman, 2024; Saputra et al., 2024). One of the sign languages that has developed naturally in Indonesia is Kolok Bengkulu Sign Language (BIKK), the language that forms the identity of the Deaf community in Bengkulu Village, Buleleng, Bali (Mudd, 2020). This village has a relatively high number of Deaf residents, allowing BIKK to develop as a mother tongue that is born, evolves, and passed down across generations.

An interesting phenomenon is that the use of BIKK is not limited to Deaf residents but is also actively used by some hearing residents. This condition makes Bengkulu Village one of the communities that has developed an inclusive communication model, where Deaf and hearing residents can interact equally (Prasetya, 2018). Kolok Sign Language possesses distinctive features shaped by communicative context, including the use of gestures, facial expressions, communication distance, eye contact, and body movements (Putri & Sutjaja, 2019). Through these non-verbal elements,

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\* Corresponding Author. Email: [agungdianjepang@unmas.ac.id](mailto:agungdianjepang@unmas.ac.id)

Kolok residents build social relationships, express respect, and maintain harmony in accordance with Balinese cultural values such as *menyama braya* (brotherhood) and *Tri Hita Karana*.

Although studies on sign languages have expanded significantly in recent years, much of the existing research focuses on well-established national sign languages such as ASL, BSL, or BISINDO, leaving local and indigenous sign languages underexplored. Kolok Bengkala Sign Language (BIKK), as a village sign language that has developed naturally within a tight-knit Deaf community, offers a unique sociolinguistic ecology that differs greatly from urban or institutionalized signing environments (Apriyanto, 2020). Its emergence, maintenance, and intergenerational transmission occur in a culturally saturated setting where local norms, ritual activities, and kinship systems strongly influence communicative behavior. This makes BIKK an important empirical site for examining how politeness is constructed through visual gestural modalities in localized cultural communities.

Despite this potential, research specifically addressing politeness in village sign languages remains extremely limited. Most politeness studies continue to focus on spoken languages, while studies on sign language politeness predominantly discuss grammatical facial markers or discourse features rather than culturally embedded interactional strategies (Muharudin et al., 2023). Consequently, little is known about how universal politeness frameworks, such as Brown and Levinson's model, manifest in non-verbal linguistic systems shaped by local cultural logics. Investigating BIKK therefore provides an opportunity to expand sociopragmatic theory by showing how facework, respect, and harmony are managed visually through embodied practices (Bonyillain, 2019). This research not only fills a theoretical gap but also supports broader efforts in language documentation and the promotion of inclusive communication in multilingual and multicultural societies.

Politeness is an important aspect of social interaction, both in verbal and non-verbal communication. In communication, politeness functions to minimize face-threatening acts and maintain harmonious relationships among participants (Nadar, 2009; Donohue & Druckman, 2025). Brown and Levinson (1978) proposed five politeness strategies: bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, off record, and not doing the FTA. These strategies are commonly analyzed in spoken utterances; however, the principle of face-saving can also be applied in gestural communication, as expressions, physical distance, and body movements may carry face-threatening potential that must be managed pragmatically.

Several previous studies have examined politeness in various domains of spoken communication, such as counseling interactions (Osman & Wahab, 2018), tourism (Andriyani et al., 2025), interactions among tourism actors (Saragih & Sirait, 2022), gossiping activities (Andriyani, 2022), and buying selling interactions in traditional markets (Anugrah et al., 2020). However, studies on politeness in non-verbal language remain very limited. Research on BIKK has largely focused on its sociocultural environment or linguistic description, rather than on the analysis of politeness strategies. Yet sign languages have their own pragmatic dynamics that can enrich understanding of how politeness is expressed beyond verbal utterances.

This research gap indicates the need for an in-depth investigation of how politeness strategies are realized through sign language, particularly in the Balinese cultural context, which places high importance on harmony and social respect. Based on this, the present study seeks to answer the following questions: (1) How are politeness strategies realized in Kolok Bengkala Sign Language? (2) What social and cultural factors influence the dynamics of politeness in interactions among the Deaf community in Bengkala Village?

Accordingly, this study aims to reveal the forms of politeness strategies in BIKK using a sociopragmatic approach based on Brown and Levinson's theory and explain how Balinese cultural values influence the ways the Kolok community establishes harmony through non-verbal communication. Theoretically, this research contributes to expanding the application of politeness theory to sign language, while practically, it supports the preservation of local sign languages and strengthens inclusive communication in society.

## II. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative method with an ethnographic approach. The focus of the research was directed toward the social and cultural phenomena as well as the communication patterns of the Kolok community in Bengkala Village. The ethnographic approach was chosen to obtain an in-depth understanding of the communicative practices of Deaf and hearing residents who use Kolok Bengkala Sign Language (BIKK). This aligns with Dell's (1962) perspective that ethnographic studies of language need to consider who speaks, to whom, when, where, and how an utterance is produced. To provide a visual representation of the research location, Figure 1 presents a map of Bengkala Village showing its position within Bali Island and the detailed boundaries of the village. The study was conducted in Bengkala Village, Kubutambahan Subdistrict, Buleleng Regency, Bali, which was purposively selected due to its high number of Deaf residents and because BIKK has developed as a mother tongue used by both Deaf and hearing residents in various daily activities.

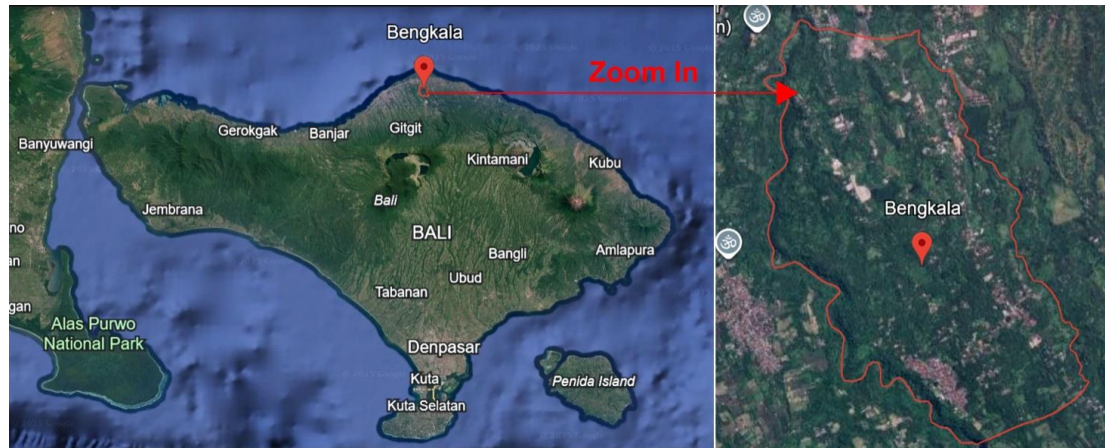


Figure 1. Map of the Research Location (Bengkala Village, Kubutambahan Subdistrict, Bali)  
Source: Google Earth

The research participants consisted of Kolok residents of various ages, hearing individuals who are proficient in BIKK, community leaders, and members of the Tourism Awareness Group (Pokdarwis) who have frequent interactions with residents and visitors. Participants were selected purposively based on their ability to use BIKK and their involvement in communicative practices within the community. Data were collected through direct observation in various interactional contexts, including family settings, inclusive school environments, community activities, traditional markets, youth interactions, and tourism activities, as well as religious ceremonies. Observations were conducted covertly to ensure natural data. The researchers also recorded gestures, facial expressions, and other non-verbal interactional elements using video recording devices, and conducted semi-structured interviews with Kolok residents, hearing residents, and Pokdarwis members to strengthen observational data and clarify the meanings of gestural expressions in BIKK. Documentation, including photographs, recordings, and field notes, was also used as supplementary data.

Data were analyzed using the pragmatic equivalent method as proposed by Sudaryanto (2015), which positions the speech partner as the determining instrument for interpreting the meaning of linguistic units. The analysis was conducted in several stages: (1) identifying gestures and expressions that appeared in each interactional context; (2) classifying the forms of signs based on their communicative functions; (3) correlating the data with politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), including bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off record; and (4) interpreting the pragmatic meaning and cultural values underlying the choice of strategies. This analysis resulted in categorical findings, later summarized in tables in the Results and Discussion section to illustrate the relationship between interactional contexts, forms of signs, politeness strategies, and associated cultural values.

To ensure data validity, this study applied source triangulation by comparing information from Deaf residents, hearing residents, and community leaders, as well as method triangulation by combining observations, interviews, and documentation. In addition, the research adhered to ethical standards, including providing participants with information about the research objectives, obtaining consent before recording, and anonymizing participant identities to maintain confidentiality.

### III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

#### A. Result

This study presents the findings of an analysis of the forms and strategies of politeness in Kolok Bengkala Sign Language (BIKK) as observed across various social interaction contexts in the Kolok community. The analysis connects hand gestures, facial expressions, body orientation, and the management of interpersonal distance with Brown and Levinson's politeness theory. This approach enabled the researchers to identify communication strategies used by Kolok residents to maintain social harmony, express respect, and negotiate interpersonal relations.

The findings indicate that politeness in BIKK is not only realized through specific sign forms but also through other non-verbal devices that play essential roles in conveying pragmatic meaning. Variations in gesture intensity, facial expressions, and cultural values such as *menyama braya* and respect for sacred spaces influence how interlocutors adapt their politeness strategies. The diversity of social contexts from family, school, market, peer interactions, community gatherings, and household environments to tourism and temple settings demonstrates that politeness strategies are selected adaptively according to social distance, participant status, and communicative goals.

To provide a visual representation of how politeness gestures are realized in BIKK, this study includes sketch illustrations representing ten social interaction contexts. Each sketch shows the structure of movement, hand orientation, and basic expression that serve as primary markers of pragmatic meaning. These visualizations clarify the relationship

between sign forms and politeness strategies while helping readers understand the distinct characteristics of non-verbal communication in the Kolok community.

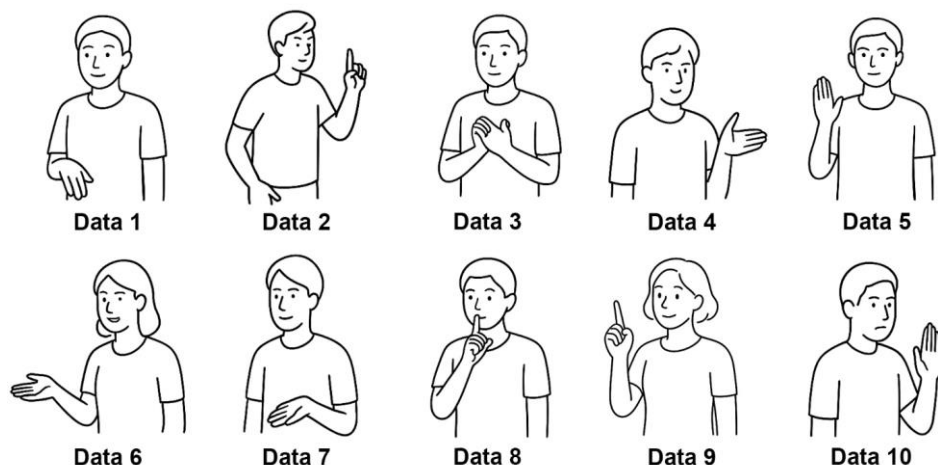


Figure 2. Sketches of Politeness Gestures in BIKK

Each dataset includes a social context, gesture description, politeness strategy based on Brown and Levinson's theory, and a brief explanation of its pragmatic function. The table format allows readers to compare politeness patterns systematically and examine how strategies are selected based on relational closeness, communicative situations, and cultural norms.

TABLE 1  
THE COMPLETE SUMMARY IS PRESENTED IN FIGURE 2

Data	Gesture Description	Interaction Context	Politeness Strategy	Brief Explanation
1	Right hand moving downward resembling a requesting motion	Family / daily interaction	Bald on Record	A direct request without elaboration
2	Right index finger pointing upward	Youth / requesting attention	Positive Politeness	Inviting attention in a friendly way
3	Both hands touching the chest	Ceremonial / honor	Positive Politeness	Shows respect, closeness, and gratitude
4	Right hand extended forward in a "please" gesture	School / asking permission	Negative Politeness	Shows respect for authority and politeness
5	Open palm raised ("stop" gesture)	Temple / tourists	Negative Politeness	A polite and careful prohibition
6	Left hand open to the side ("please/go ahead")	Tourism / service	Positive Politeness	Friendly offering or inviting gesture
7	Right hand directed to chest asking for help	Youth / requesting help	Positive Politeness	Shows closeness and a soft request
8	Finger on the lips ("be quiet")	Community hall / meeting	Off Record	An indirect reprimand to avoid embarrassment
9	Finger pointing upward	Household / instruction	Negative Politeness	Polite request for attention
10	Open palm forward ("prohibition") + temple icon	Temple / sacred area restriction	Negative Politeness	Polite prohibition while preserving respect

Overall, the ten datasets analyzed demonstrate the realization of the four politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) namely bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off record. Each strategy emerges adaptively according to the social context, the closeness of the relationship, and the cultural norms practiced within the Kolok community. The various gestural forms in Kolok Bengkulu Sign Language (BIKK) illustrate how Kolok residents realize politeness strategies across different social settings.

In family contexts (Data 1), the gesture is expressed through a downward movement of the right hand with the fingers forming a requesting shape, resembling the motion of "taking or asking for something." This gesture is used directly in family interactions characterized by emotional closeness and mutual trust. Therefore, it is categorized as a bald-on-record strategy because the speaker conveys the intention in a straightforward and efficient manner without requiring mitigation. The minimal face threat and strong emotional bonds within the family domain make such direct forms natural and even more effective for gaining attention or eliciting a quick response.

In contrast, Data 2 presents youth interactions, where a gesture of the right index finger pointing upward is used to request attention. This gesture falls under positive politeness because it creates a sense of closeness and invites participation among peers. Kolok youths use this gesture not as an authoritative command but as a social signal

indicating closeness, invitation, and comfort within the relationship. Relaxed facial expressions and open body posture further support the function of this gesture as a marker of solidarity that strengthens interpersonal relationships.

In tourism contexts (Data 3), the gesture of both hands touching the chest serves as a culturally significant symbol of respect. In Balinese and Kolok cultural settings, this gesture signifies respect, gratitude, or a request. In interactions with tourists, it is understood as a positive politeness strategy because it conveys friendliness, sincerity, and hospitality toward guests. Moreover, this gesture reflects Balinese cultural values such as *tresna* (affection), *tattwam asi* (empathy), and *menyama braya* (kinship), which cultivate harmonious and respectful social relationships, especially in intercultural situations.

In Data 4, the school setting exhibits a gesture of asking for permission with an open hand extended forward. This form demonstrates acknowledgment of hierarchy and respect for the teacher's authority, thus falling under negative politeness. The speaker employs more controlled body movements, polite facial expressions, and non-invasive hand gestures as forms of respect and caution to avoid threatening the teacher's authority.

In Data 5, interactions among community members are shown through a raised-hand greeting accompanied by a friendly expression. This gesture illustrates positive politeness, as greetings function not only as opening signals but also as symbols of friendliness and appreciation among community members. This form reinforces social relationships and maintains harmony within the community.

Data 6 presents the market context, where speakers use an inviting gesture with the right hand open and extended forward. This movement represents helpfulness, friendliness, and cooperation, and is therefore classified as positive politeness. Market interactions require flexibility, and this gesture contributes to creating a comfortable transactional atmosphere.

Similarly, Data 7, which also occurs among youths, features an open-hand gesture directed forward to request help. This form reflects social closeness and trust among peers and again represents positive politeness, as the speaker emphasizes solidarity and mutual support.

Data 8 depicts an upward-pointing index finger as an indirect warning. This form is used in social contexts that require delicacy to avoid embarrassing the interlocutor. Therefore, it is categorized as an off-record strategy because the message is conveyed indirectly, allowing the speaker to maintain good social relations.

Data 9 presents the gesture of placing a finger on the lips as a sign to "be quiet," which is also an off-record form used to gently correct or remind others without causing offense or creating tension in shared spaces such as community halls or households.

Finally, Data 10 illustrates a gesture of an open hand extended forward used in temple contexts to signal prohibition against entering a sacred area. This gesture is realized as a negative politeness strategy because, despite the clarity of the prohibition, the speaker still attempts to maintain respect, politeness, and caution, especially toward visitors or tourists.

## *B. Discussion*

The discussion of the findings in this study shows that politeness in Kolok Bengkulu Sign Language (BIKK) is a communicative practice that is shaped not only by the forms of gestures but also by local cultural values, social structure, and interpersonal relationships among speakers. The realization of politeness across the ten analyzed datasets indicates that the Kolok community adapts Brown and Levinson's (1987) strategies bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off record into a visual-gestural medium in a distinctly unique way. These findings are consistent with Othman (2024) and Freitas et al. (2017), who argue that sign languages have complex pragmatic systems in which facial expressions, gesture intensity, and body orientation serve both grammatical and interpersonal functions.

In family and youth contexts (Data 1 and Data 2), gestures are used directly or semi-directly to convey intentions without excessive mitigation. Data 1 demonstrates a bald-on-record strategy that is common in close relationships because the face threat is minimal. This supports Dillard et al.'s (1997) findings that interactions within intimate relationships tend to use direct and expressive forms without diminishing politeness. In Data 2, positive politeness is evident through an upward-pointing gesture used to draw attention among peers. This pattern is consistent with Ju and Zhao's (2024) research, which shows that adolescents often use non-verbal forms of invitation as signals of solidarity and social closeness.

Data 3 through Data 5 demonstrate how Balinese cultural values influence the selection of politeness strategies. The gesture of both hands touching the chest (Data 3) represents a culturally deep expression of respect in Balinese society and is understood as positive politeness in tourism contexts. This aligns with Eslami et al.'s (2023) assertion that politeness is a cultural practice shaped by local norms. Data 4 illustrates a negative politeness strategy through a permission-seeking gesture directed at teachers, confirming Osman and Wahab's (2018) and Jung and Song's (2015) findings that hierarchical relationships encourage the use of mitigation strategies. Meanwhile, Data 5 presents a raised-hand greeting used among community members, which reflects positive politeness as a symbol of friendliness and mutual respect. This pattern also resonates with Saragih and Sirait (2022) in their examination of politeness strategies in the tourism sector of Sumatra.

Data 6 and Data 7, situated in market and youth-helping contexts, highlight that positive politeness dominates situations requiring cooperation and social solidarity. These findings align with Jakučionytė's (2020) cross-cultural politeness research, which notes that cultures characterized by high levels of social closeness tend to employ strategies

that emphasize camaraderie. In market interactions (Data 6), gestures of offering or inviting contribute to creating a pleasant transactional atmosphere. In youth contexts (Data 7), gestures requesting assistance signify trust and social cohesion among peers.

Off-record strategies appear predominantly in Data 8 and Data 9, which represent situations requiring pragmatic caution. The “be quiet” gesture (Data 8) serves as an indirect reprimand intended to avoid confrontation, supporting Brown and Levinson’s (1987) face-threat mitigation theory. This aligns with Cattell et al.’s (2008) observations on indirect strategies as tools for maintaining harmony in public spaces. Data 9, showing an upward-pointing gesture as a mild reminder in households, also indicates the use of an off-record strategy to avoid interpersonal conflict, similar to Andriyani’s (2022) findings in the context of gossip and face-threat avoidance.

Finally, Data 10 illustrates negative politeness in temple interactions involving tourists. The open-palm prohibition gesture conveys restrictions while attempting to maintain respect, politeness, and cultural sensitivity. This finding supports studies in cultural tourism (Nofriatin, 2024), which argue that non-verbal communication in Balinese culture is heavily influenced by values of sacredness and ritual etiquette. In the Kolok context, this gesture demonstrates how local sign language functions not only as a communication tool but also as a medium for reinforcing cultural norms and safeguarding sacred spaces.

Overall, the findings of this study reinforce the idea that non-verbal communication in sign languages has a rich and complex politeness system, which may even be more detailed than spoken communication due to its multimodal nature. The realization of politeness strategies in BIKK is shaped not only by pragmatic goals but also strongly guided by Balinese cultural values such as *tresna*, *tatwam asi*, and *menyama braya*. Thus, this study makes a significant contribution to the development of sociopragmatic research in sign language and enriches the understanding of how Deaf communities build social harmony through gestures, facial expressions, and culturally embedded practices.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study show that politeness in Kolok Bengkulu Sign Language (BIKK) is realized through a combination of gestures, facial expressions, movement intensity, body orientation, and interactional distance, all of which are adaptively used according to the social context. The ten datasets analyzed reveal that all politeness strategies within Brown and Levinson’s framework bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off record appear in interactions within the Kolok community in diverse forms, including iconic, expressive, and regulatory signs. These politeness patterns are strongly influenced by Balinese cultural values such as *menyama braya*, traditional etiquette, and the harmony principles of *Tri Hita Karana*, which guide Kolok residents in maintaining social relationships through context-sensitive non-verbal communication.

Theoretically, this study expands sociopragmatic research by demonstrating that Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory can be meaningfully applied to a local sign language, in which gestures and expressions play significant pragmatic roles. Practically, the findings are beneficial for the development of inclusive education, the preservation of traditional sign languages, and the formulation of disability-friendly communication guidelines in social and tourism contexts. This study also opens opportunities for further research related to the linguistic documentation of BIKK, the development of a sign language corpus, and the exploration of politeness in intercultural interactions involving the Kolok community.

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**Anak Agung Ayu Dian Andriyani**, S.S., M.Hum. is a lecturer in the Japanese Literature Study Program at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Universitas Mahasaraswati Denpasar. One of the guiding principles that she always adheres to in her work is "learning abundantly and extensively." This motto drives her to continually produce various types of publications, which have been featured in nationally indexed (SINTA) journals and reputable international journals. She has actively participated as a speaker in national and international seminars and as a guest lecturer, focusing on the patterns of interaction in applying Japanese hospitality, particularly within the tourism domain. Her extensive experience as a Japanese-speaking Guest Relation Officer at a prominent travel agency in Bali for 10 years, from 2005 to 2015, has provided her with valuable insights and inspiration for her work in the tourism domain. Her research projects have been funded by both institutional and government bodies, including the Ministry of Research, Technology, and Higher Education. Likewise, she has had the opportunity to conduct comparative research as part of the Sandwich-like PKPI program at Shizuoka Bunka Geijutsu (SUAC) Shizuoka, directly observing the hospitality practices in the Japanese business domain. Furthermore, her research collaboration with LPDP (Indonesia Endowment Fund for Education Agency), Universitas Jenderal Soedirman, HPI (Association of Indonesian Translators) of Bali, Kadisparda (Bali Government Tourism Office) Province of Bali and Bangli region, focused on formulating Special Tourism Governance as a Strategy for Engaging Local Communities and Developing Bali's Tourism Resources through the Cultivation of Tourism Hospitality Based on the Values of Tri Hita Karana. Email: [agungdianjepang@unmas.ac.id](mailto:agungdianjepang@unmas.ac.id)



**Ida Ayu Putri Gita Ardiantari**, S.S., M.Hum. is an English lecturer at Faculty of Foreign Languages, Universitas Mahasaraswati Denpasar. She completed her undergraduate education in English Literature at Udayana University and his master studies at the same university in the Linguistics Study Program. Currently, she is the co-chief editor in Elysian Journal, an English Linguistic, Literature, and Translation Journal in Faculty of Foreign Languages, Universitas Mahasaraswati Denpasar. She loves to learn many things related to language, art and culture. She interests to linguistic, applied linguistic and discourse study. She loves to teach English as foreign language and for specific purpose. She presented her research in several reputable international journals indexed by Scopus and national journals accredited by Sinta as well as various national and international proceedings. She joined some community services related to social humanities especially in facilitating foreign language learning. She also got several Intellectual Property Rights for her community service activities. She has two textbooks published by an ISSN publisher and several unpublished teaching modules to support his activities as a lecturer. Email: [idaayupugitaa@unmas.ac.id](mailto:idaayupugitaa@unmas.ac.id)



**Wiwik Yulianti** is a lecturer in the Master's Program in Linguistics, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Sebelas Maret University, Surakarta, Indonesia. Throughout her academic career, she has been actively involved in research as a member of the Indonesian Linguistics Research Group at Sebelas Maret University. Her research interests include linguistics, sociolinguistics, and language editing. She has also contributed as a reviewer and committee member in various academic activities and scholarly events. Email: [wiwikyulianti@staff.uns.ac.id](mailto:wiwikyulianti@staff.uns.ac.id)



**I Made Wisnu Giri** is a teacher and interpreter of Kata Kolok Sign Language, the indigenous sign language used by the Kolok Deaf community in Bengkala Village, Bali, Indonesia. He completed his primary and secondary education in Buleleng and subsequently pursued specialized training in communication and education for individuals with hearing disabilities. He is actively involved in teaching and supporting the Kolok community in learning and using the local sign language and serves as an interpreter in various cultural events, research projects, and academic visits related to Kata Kolok. He also contributes to the documentation of Kata Kolok Sign Language and the preservation of the cultural heritage of Bengkala Deaf Village through collaboration with educational institutions, researchers, and community organizations.



**Kundharu Saddhono**, S.S., M.Hum., C.Ed., CISHR. is a lecturer in Indonesian Language Education at the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Sebelas Maret, Surakarta. He completed his undergraduate and master's degrees in Linguistics at Universitas Sebelas Maret and his Ph.D. in Education at Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta. Additionally, he holds certifications in editing and social humanities research, namely Certified Editor (C.Ed.) and Certified International Social-Humanities Researcher (CISHR). Currently, he is ranked as the top language expert in Indonesia according to the AD Scientific Index for Language and Literature. As of early 2023, he has over 100 Scopus-indexed publications. These two activities focused on the Indonesian Language for Foreign Speakers (BIPA). Email: kundharu\_s@staff.uns.ac.id



**Aldi Dwi Saputra**, S.Pd., Gr., M.Pd. is a doctoral candidate in Indonesian language education, Universitas Sebelas Maret, Surakarta, Indonesia. Research interests include a wide range of topics related to Indonesian Language and Literature Teaching, Learning Media, and Indonesian Language for Foreign Speakers (BIPA). He has published in many international journals and actively participated in national and international conferences and academic workshops. Email: aldidsptr@student.uns.ac.id