



Communication Strategies of Christian Religious Education Teachers in Christian Religious Education Learning: A Case Study at SMP Negeri 2 Panombeian Panei

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to analyze the communication patterns of Christian Religious Education teachers in the learning process at SMP Negeri 2 Panombeian Panei, Simalungun Regency, North Sumatra. Effective communication is an essential component in conveying Christian values and building meaningful learning relationships. A descriptive qualitative approach with case study methods was used to collect data through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The results showed that Christian Religious Education teachers implemented multi-directional communication patterns with a dialogical-contextual approach that considers the local Batak cultural background. This communication pattern includes verbal and non-verbal aspects based on Christian values such as love, understanding, and respect for students. The main challenges include diversity in students' religious understanding levels, limited learning media, and the complexity of integrating Christian values with local culture. This research recommends enhancing the communication competence of Christian Religious Education teachers through continuous professional development training and optimizing the use of information technology as a learning communication medium.

Keywords: *Teacher communication, Christian religious education, contextual learning, Batak culture*

INTRODUCTION

Communication is the essence of the learning process that cannot be overlooked in education, particularly in the context of Christian Religious Education (CRE). In this educational setting, communication is not merely a tool for transmitting knowledge from teacher to students, but more importantly, it serves as the primary medium for shaping character, internalizing Christian values, and fostering meaningful relationships between

students and God. Groome (2011) emphasizes that in CRE, the learning process should not be oriented solely toward cognitive aspects but also toward the development of students' affective and spiritual dimensions. In this regard, CRE teachers play a central role, as their communication carries a dual dimension: as educators and as spiritual mentors. Therefore, the quality of teachers' communication significantly determines the success of CRE learning. Boehlke (2011) further asserts that teachers' communication in this context must function as a bridge between the teachings of faith and the lived realities of students, ensuring that what is taught is not only intellectually understood but also spiritually embodied. Homrighausen and Enklaar (2013) add that the ultimate goal of CRE is to guide students to personally know God and to establish a dynamic and living relationship with Him. This requires a mode of communication that is not only informative but also transformative and relational. The effective communication in CRE largely depends on the teacher's ability to foster meaningful dialogue with students. Research conducted by Sidjabat (2019) indicates that the success of CRE learning cannot be separated from the teacher's capacity to build open, empathetic, and reflective communication. Teachers who deliver lessons in a one-way manner without engaging students actively tend to fail in creating vibrant learning that truly touches the heart. Nevertheless, it should be noted that empirical data specifically examining the communication patterns of CRE teachers in public schools in Indonesia remains very limited. This gap becomes more apparent when considering local contexts with distinct cultural backgrounds, such as the Batak community in North Sumatra. The richness and depth of local culture strongly influence how students perceive and respond to learning, including in CRE. Consequently, research into the communication patterns of CRE teachers that takes into account local cultural dynamics becomes both relevant and necessary.

One educational context that reflects this reality is SMP Negeri 2 Panombeian Panei, located in Simalungun Regency, North Sumatra. The school has a relatively diverse student population, with the majority coming from Christian families deeply rooted in Batak cultural traditions. This situation presents unique challenges for CRE teachers in delivering lessons that not only align with the national curriculum but are also culturally and spiritually relevant to students. It is in this context that CRE teachers' communication is tested: whether they are able to connect Christian values with students' everyday realities, which are deeply shaped by local traditions and cultural norms. Hasugian (2021) highlights the importance of contextual approaches in CRE that adapt learning strategies to students' sociocultural backgrounds. However, few studies have explored in depth how such contextual approaches are concretely implemented in teachers' classroom communication. A deeper understanding of this matter is crucial for developing CRE learning that is not only academically effective but also spiritually and culturally meaningful. Based on this background, the present study formulates several key research problems. First, what communication patterns are employed by CRE teachers in the learning process at SMP Negeri 2 Panombeian Panei? This question stems from the assumption that teachers' communication patterns determine the quality of classroom interaction and the achievement of CRE learning objectives. Second, what factors influence the effectiveness of CRE teachers' communication in the learning process? This question is significant for identifying both challenges and opportunities in instructional communication, whether internal (such as teachers' competencies and students'

readiness) or external (such as school support and cultural background). Third, how do CRE teachers integrate Christian values and local cultural contexts into their instructional communication? This question aims to explore the extent to which teachers can draw upon local culture as a resource for facilitating students' understanding and internalization of Christian values. The objectives of this study are aligned with the three research questions outlined above. First, this study seeks to analyze the communication patterns employed by CRE teachers in the learning process at SMP Negeri 2 Panombeian Panei. This analysis includes both verbal and non-verbal communication, as well as how such communication fosters pedagogical and spiritual relationships with students. Second, the study aims to identify the factors that influence the effectiveness of CRE teachers' communication, including pedagogical competence, use of learning media, mastery of subject matter, and sensitivity to students' cultural dynamics. Third, this study intends to describe the strategies used by CRE teachers to integrate Christian values with the local cultural context in classroom communication. This involves examining how teachers design and deliver lessons that are both contextual and relevant to students' daily lives. The significance of this research lies in its theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it enriches scholarly discourse on instructional communication within the context of CRE, particularly concerning the integration of Christian values and local culture. It may also provide a foundation for developing more inclusive and contextual educational communication theories. Practically, the findings of this study can serve as a reference for CRE teachers in designing more effective communication strategies that are responsive to students' needs. Teachers may gain new insights into how to build communication that not only informs but also shapes and inspires. Furthermore, institutions involved in the education and training of CRE teachers can utilize the findings to develop training programs that are more contextualized and responsive to field realities. Thus, this study is expected not only to contribute to the advancement of knowledge but also to bring positive impacts on the practice of Christian Religious Education in public schools, particularly in regions with strong cultural traditions such as North Sumatra.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design, as this approach provides the space to explore phenomena in depth within a natural and specific context. A qualitative approach enables researchers to understand social realities from the participants' perspectives, while the case study design allows for a comprehensive examination of various aspects of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers' communication in the learning process. By using a case study, data were collected from multiple sources to obtain a holistic understanding of the communication patterns employed by CRE teachers in a particular context—namely, a school situated within the Batak cultural setting in North Sumatra. The research site was SMP Negeri 2 Panombeian Panei, Simalungun Regency, North Sumatra. The selection of this school was based on its regional characteristics and the diversity of students' backgrounds, which were considered relevant to the focus of the study. The research subjects consisted of two CRE teachers, the principal as a supporting informant, fifteen students from grades VII, VIII, and IX who actively participated in CRE classes, and three parents who served as

triangulation informants. Data were collected using four primary techniques. First, participatory observation was conducted over eight learning sessions to examine the verbal and non-verbal interactions of CRE teachers in the classroom. Second, in-depth interviews were carried out with teachers, the principal, students, and parents to gain a deeper understanding of their perceptions and experiences regarding communication in the learning process. Third, documentation was gathered from various sources, including lesson plans, teaching materials, and teachers' reflective notes. Fourth, a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was organized with students to explore their opinions and experiences collectively. The data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which includes three main stages: data condensation, data display in narrative and visual forms, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data validity was ensured through source and technique triangulation, member checking with participants, and peer debriefing to gain broader perspectives on the research findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

SMP Negeri 2 Panombeian Panei is located in Panombeian Panei District, Simalungun Regency, North Sumatra. The school has a student population of 420, with a religious composition of 62% Protestant, 28% Catholic, and 10% Muslim. The majority of students come from families with Batak Simalungun and Batak Toba cultural backgrounds. Christian Religious Education (CRE) is taught by two teachers with undergraduate degrees in Christian Religious Education and with teaching experience of 12 years and 8 years, respectively. Based on an analysis of observational and interview data, it was found that CRE teachers at SMP Negeri 2 Panombeian Panei applied a variety of communication patterns. Verbal communication was characterized by the use of inclusive language, in which teachers deliberately avoided complex theological jargon and instead employed simple terms that students could easily understand. One teacher explained: *"I always try to convey concepts of faith in simple language that is relevant to students' daily lives. For example, when teaching about the love of Christ, I use examples from their family or community experiences"* (Interview G1, 12/02/2025). Teachers also occasionally integrated local Batak expressions to explain concepts aligned with Christian values, such as *"Habonaron do bona"* (honesty is the foundation) and *"Somba marhula-hula"* (respecting the wife's family), which were positively received by students. In addition, teachers frequently posed reflective questions to encourage students to apply Christian values in their everyday contexts, asking, for example: *"How can the principle of Christ's love be practiced in your relationships with friends of different faiths?"* or *"What does 'loving others' mean in the context of living in a diverse environment?"* Furthermore, narrative communication played a dominant role, with teachers using biblical stories and contemporary narratives to convey Christian values. Observations revealed that approximately 73% of lesson time involved storytelling integrated with reflective discussions.

Non-verbal communication also played an important role. Teachers used warm facial expressions and open gestures, creating a classroom atmosphere conducive to dialogue. As one student noted: *"Our teacher always smiles and listens attentively when we speak. That makes me feel unafraid to ask questions or express my opinion"* (FGD S8, 15/02/2025). Classroom arrangements were often modified into circular or small-group

seating (42% of sessions), facilitating multi-directional communication not only between teacher and students but also among students themselves. Visual symbols were also employed, with teachers using Christian symbols and local cultural artifacts such as the *ulos* (traditional Batak cloth) to illustrate particular concepts—for instance, using *ulos* motifs to explain unity in the body of Christ. In terms of interactional direction, three patterns emerged. One-way communication was used mainly when presenting factual information about doctrine or church history (23% of total instructional time). Two-way communication was dominant, particularly in question-and-answer sessions and guided discussions between teacher and students (52%). Multi-directional communication was encouraged through group discussions and collaborative projects involving students, teachers, and other learning resources (25%).

Factors Influencing CRE Teachers' Communication

Several supporting and inhibiting factors influenced the effectiveness of CRE teachers' communication. On the supporting side, the personal competence of teachers was significant. Both CRE teachers demonstrated strong theological understanding and the ability to translate abstract concepts into concrete and relevant explanations. As one student remarked: *"Our CRE teachers explain things in ways that make it easy for us to understand. They can relate biblical teachings to our daily lives"* (FGD S12, 15/02/2025). Institutional support also played an important role, with school policies allowing teachers the flexibility to develop innovative learning methods, including extracurricular activities such as visits to local churches and community service. Additionally, collaboration with local churches strengthened the learning process through guest speakers and opportunities for students to engage in service practices. Several inhibiting factors were identified. Students had varied levels of religious understanding and experience, requiring teachers to adapt communication so that it could be understood by all. As one teacher stated: *"My biggest challenge is when, in one class, there are students who are very active in church and know the Bible well, while others rarely attend church and have little basic knowledge of Christian faith"* (Interview G2, 13/02/2025). Limited teaching media due to restricted technological facilities reduced the variety of communication methods that could be employed. Moreover, the limited instructional time of three hours per week was considered insufficient to foster deeper communication about Christian values.

Strategies for Integrating Christian Values and Local Culture

The study revealed several strategies applied by CRE teachers in integrating Christian values with the local Batak cultural context. One approach was the reinterpretation of Batak cultural values, such as *Dalihan Na Tolu* (the three hearthstones), from a Christian perspective. For example, the concept of *somba marhula-hula* (respecting the wife's family) was linked to biblical teachings on love and respect within the family. Teachers also used Batak folktales and proverbs (*umpama* and *umpasa*) as bridges for explaining Christian values. Observations indicated that this method effectively helped students connect Christian values with their cultural context. One teacher stated: *"I often use Batak proverbs such as 'Ompunta do gabe ianakhonta' (what our ancestors have done will be seen in their grandchildren) to explain the concept of passing on faith in the family, as taught in Deuteronomy 6"* (Interview G1, 12/02/2025). Another key strategy was the dialogical-contextual approach, which encouraged students to identify points of

convergence between Christian values and local cultural traditions. As one student reflected: *“In discussions about ‘loving others,’ we were asked to identify practices in Batak culture that reflect the value of love. This helped me see that many of our cultural values actually align with the teachings of Christ”* (FGD S5, 15/02/2025). Through these strategies, CRE teachers demonstrated their capacity to contextualize Christian teachings in ways that were both spiritually meaningful and culturally resonant for their students.

Analysis of CRE Teachers’ Communication Patterns

The communication patterns employed by Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers at SMP Negeri 2 Panombeian Panei reflect the application of effective educational communication principles rooted in modern pedagogical theories and approaches. According to Richmond, Wrench, and Gorham (2018), effective communication in education entails clarity of delivery, empathy toward learners, and encouragement of active participation in the learning process. Within the context of CRE instruction at this school, these three aspects are clearly demonstrated through teacher–student interactions that are not unidirectional but instead foster dialogue and student responses. Teachers not only deliver material verbally but also create spaces for discussion, open-ended questions, and responsive engagement that stimulate students’ emotional and intellectual involvement. One of the most prominent aspects of CRE teachers’ communication patterns is their use of a dialogical and multi-directional approach, in which teachers do not position themselves as the sole source of truth but as facilitators who guide students to discover the meaning of faith personally. This approach resonates with Paulo Freire’s (2018) notion of liberating education, which promotes critical dialogue between educators and learners. In this view, communication serves as a medium of liberation, where students are treated as active subjects capable of thinking, reflecting, and growing in faith as well as in Christian moral values. CRE teachers at this school consciously engage in contextualized communication. They employ inclusive language and, on several occasions, integrate Batak vernacular expressions to explain theological concepts. This strategy exemplifies the idea of “contextualized communication” as described by Sidjabat (2019), which stresses the importance of conveying messages of faith through language and symbols familiar to students’ everyday lives. Within the Christian educational tradition, this approach aligns with Groome’s (2011) incarnational principle, which emphasizes that the Gospel message must take concrete form in the lived contexts of learners, just as Christ became incarnate in the human world. Consequently, CRE communication that incorporates local language, students’ daily experiences, and indigenous wisdom not only enhances comprehension but also fosters emotional closeness between learners and the values of faith being taught. Another defining feature of CRE teachers’ communication at this school is the narrative method. In many sessions, teachers convey Christian values through biblical stories, accounts of Christian figures, and real-life experiences relevant to students’ situations. This method is closely aligned with Westerhoff’s (2012) perspective on the centrality of narrative in Christian education. Westerhoff highlights the unique power of stories to communicate faith truths in deeper and more personal ways, allowing students to identify with characters in the narrative and reflect on the values conveyed in relation to their own lives. Through storytelling, students not only acquire cognitive knowledge but also experience emotional and spiritual engagement, which is the essence of CRE learning.

The narrative approach extends beyond storytelling itself, encouraging students to respond, ask questions, and even share personal stories related to the themes discussed. This creates a classroom atmosphere that is dialogical and reflective, where communication becomes a medium of transformation rather than mere information transmission. Teachers also facilitate reflective discussions after storytelling, enabling students to internalize Christian values more deeply and apply them in everyday life, whether in school, family, or community settings. The communication patterns employed by CRE teachers at SMP Negeri 2 Panombeian Panei reflect a profound understanding of the nature of communication in religious education, namely as a means of shaping a faith that is contextual, reflective, and liberating. By integrating local language, Batak cultural values, and faith narratives, teachers provide meaningful and relevant learning experiences for students. This demonstrates that communication in Christian education is not only about technical methods but also about spiritual attitudes and cultural awareness that enable teachers to act as bridges between divine messages and the lived realities of students. Thus, the communication approaches adopted by CRE teachers in this school can serve as a model for developing CRE pedagogy in other culturally unique contexts. Their emphasis on dialogue, contextualization, and narrative holds great potential in shaping young people who not only understand faith theoretically but also embody it in a plural and dynamic society.

Contextual Communication in the Perspective of CRE Theory

The findings regarding the integration of Christian values and local culture in CRE teachers' communication at SMP Negeri 2 Panombeian Panei highlight that religious learning does not occur in a cultural vacuum but is deeply shaped by the social and cultural backgrounds of learners. This reinforces the concept of "Contextual Christian Religious Education" as articulated by Hasugian (2021), which emphasizes that communication in CRE must not only be grounded in theological truth derived from Scripture but also take into account the lived realities and cultural experiences of students. By doing so, the Christian message can be conveyed in ways that are more meaningful and relevant, thereby making learning more effective and impactful. A key strategy identified in this study is the reinterpretation of Batak cultural values in the light of Christian teachings. CRE teachers do not reject local culture but instead engage in theological adaptation of cultural values. For instance, the Batak value of *marsisarian* (communal solidarity and cooperation) is reinterpreted as a reflection of Christian principles of fellowship and service. This approach resonates with Bevans' (2012) notion of the "translation model" in contextual theology, which emphasizes that the Gospel message should not be transmitted raw and context-free but translated into the language, symbols, and values familiar to learners, without losing its essential theological substance. The integration of local culture is also evident in teachers' use of Batak folklore and proverbs as mediums for imparting Christian values. Stories of legendary Batak figures exemplifying honesty, courage, and sacrifice are used to illustrate biblical teachings on faith, love, and forgiveness. Proverbs such as "*Anso tarida do na oto, anso tartedal do na marsiajar*" (the wise are known by their actions, the learners by their words) serve as illustrations of Christian witness in daily life. This approach reflects Hesselgrave's (2017) concept of "cross-cultural communication" in religious education, which stresses the importance of employing local forms to convey the universal truths of the Gospel.

Through this integration of Christian values and local cultural elements, CRE teachers act not only as educators of subject matter but also as mediators of faith and culture. They facilitate an understanding of faith that remains rooted in students' cultural identities, thus fostering a synthesis between faith and culture. This contributes significantly to forming a holistic and grounded faith identity while avoiding antagonism toward local culture, which often arises when faith is taught in an exclusive and decontextualized manner. Nonetheless, such contextual communication is not without challenges. Teachers must possess strong cultural sensitivity and sufficient theological competence to discern which cultural values can be embraced, which need adaptation, and which must be rejected in light of Christian teachings. Here, the role of teachers as practical theologians becomes critical, requiring the ability to interpret culture critically while safeguarding the integrity of the Gospel. Therefore, CRE teacher training should include contextual theology and cross-cultural communication to equip teachers to fulfill this role wisely and effectively. Contextualized communication has a positive impact on student engagement. When faith values are conveyed through familiar cultural languages and symbols, students are more likely to understand, accept, and internalize them. This supports Groome's (2011) view that effective Christian education must address the whole person—cognitively, affectively, and culturally. Thus, CRE learning shapes not only religious knowledge but also faith-based character and identity. In the long run, this communication pattern fosters the development of inclusive faith communities deeply rooted in local cultural contexts, preparing students to become social agents who can mediate between faith values and cultural challenges in their communities.

The challenge of diverse levels of student understanding faced by CRE teachers at SMP Negeri 2 Panombeian Panei reflects the realities highlighted by Nuhamara (2018), namely the heterogeneity of students' religious backgrounds and understandings in public schools. Although students are formally taught the same subject, in practice they differ significantly in mastery, faith experiences, and learning motivations. In such contexts, uniform and monolithic communication strategies are ineffective and risk neglecting the needs of some learners. To address this reality, differentiated approaches in communication become essential. Tomlinson and Moon (2013) argue that differentiation is not merely about assigning different tasks but about tailoring communication strategies, media, and delivery methods to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. In the context of CRE, this requires teachers to read classroom dynamics and deploy varied communication strategies—both verbal and non-verbal—to reach students with differing levels of understanding. For example, narrative and visual methods may be more effective for students with lower levels of comprehension, while dialogical and reflective approaches can be optimized for those with stronger foundations. Another significant challenge is the limitation of learning media, which hinders effective communication between teachers and students. The research findings indicate shortages in visual aids, contextual learning materials, and interactive media that could make the delivery of Christian values more concrete and engaging. This limitation is particularly pressing in a culturally rich context like Panombeian Panei, where contextual approaches are necessary to link faith messages directly to students' everyday lives.

The development of contextualized CRE learning media is therefore imperative. Tety and Wiraatmadja (2017) emphasize the urgency of innovative learning media that address cognitive, affective, and psychomotor dimensions. Such media should not only transmit

information but also create meaningful learning experiences that shape attitudes and behaviors. Examples include instructional videos integrating Batak folklore with Christian messages, infographics of moral values based on local proverbs, or digital educational games teaching principles such as love, honesty, and forgiveness within students' cultural settings. Contextual learning media can also enhance teachers' non-verbal communication, including facial expressions, gestures, and classroom arrangements that support more intimate and open interactions. Teachers may use visual symbols relevant to local culture, such as Batak motifs or traditional symbols, to bridge theological messages with students' cultural identities. However, institutional support is essential for the effective development of such media. Schools should provide training for CRE teachers in designing adaptive and contextualized learning resources, while partnerships with local churches and theological institutions can enrich resources with content that is both theological and culturally relevant. Creativity is equally vital. Even in the absence of advanced technology, teachers can employ simple media such as drawings, handmade teaching aids, small role-plays, or creative use of chalkboards to deliver faith messages meaningfully. The most important factor is ensuring that messages are received and internalized by students according to their developmental stages and contexts.

Conclusion

Based on the findings and data analysis of this study, it can be concluded that Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers at SMP Negeri 2 Panombeian Panei have implemented a multi-directional communication pattern in teaching, characterized by dialogical and contextual approaches. This approach reflects the teachers' awareness of the importance of adapting communication to the cultural backgrounds of students, particularly the Batak culture, which strongly shapes students' lives at the school. The communication patterns employed include verbal elements such as the use of inclusive language, integration of local dialects in explaining subject matter, delivery of reflective questions to stimulate students' critical thinking, and the use of stories or narratives as teaching tools. At the same time, non-verbal aspects are also evident in the learning process, such as friendly facial expressions, supportive body movements, seating arrangements that foster a dialogical atmosphere, and the use of visual symbols relevant to Christian values and local culture. Several factors contribute to the effectiveness of teacher communication in CRE learning, including teachers' personal competence, institutional support from the school, and the involvement of the church community in supporting the educational process. Nonetheless, certain challenges remain, such as varying levels of student comprehension, limited use of appropriate instructional media, and restricted time allocation for lessons. Despite these challenges, CRE teachers strive to integrate Christian values with local wisdom through strategies such as the reinterpretation of Batak cultural values, the use of folktales and proverbs as illustrative tools, and dialogical delivery that provides space for students to find intersections between their Christian faith and cultural identity. Based on these conclusions, it is recommended that CRE teachers continue to develop adaptive communication methods that respond to students' needs and learning styles, while also beginning to utilize information technology to enhance communication in more interactive and varied ways. Schools are encouraged to provide support in the form of continuous professional development for CRE teachers and the provision of contextually

relevant teaching media. Furthermore, collaboration with local churches and theological education institutions should be strengthened. For further development, future researchers may explore the impact of communication patterns on students' learning outcomes and character formation, as well as design a contextual model of CRE communication applicable in various regions across Indonesia.

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