

A Qualitative Study to Explore the Construct of Communication Skills in Middle Childhood

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to explore aspects of children's communication skills in middle childhood in Indonesia. The study was conducted by using qualitative approach. Data were collected through FGDs with parents of school-aged children and group interviews with fifth-grade students. The FGDs were used to explore parents' opinions on the expected ways of communicating that children aged 9-11 years or around grades 4 to 6 should be able to perform. In the group interviews, the students were asked to give their opinions on the appropriate ways of communicating. During this process, the children were particularly asked to respond to 14 picture stories that depicted everyday communication situations. The 14 stories used in the interviews were developed based on a preliminary study that explored the variety of communications children commonly did in their everyday life. All the data collected were analysed by using inductive thematic analysis. The result of the analysis revealed eight themes, including receptive skills, language accuracy, context understanding, openness, assertiveness, self-confidence, social sensitivity, and politeness. This research found two main findings which are themes related to receptive communication skills that emphasized understanding on non-verbal messages and themes related to structure of communication skills that focused on social competence. The themes that represented social competence indicated that both characteristics of individualistic and collectivistic cultures have roles in shaping children's communication skills.

Keywords: communication skills, middle childhood, Indonesia

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Introduction

Communication skills are one of the essential social competencies for a child to have. Communication is process of conveying and receiving meaningful messages in form of verbal and non-verbal symbols (Beebe et al., 2014; Welten et al., 2012; West & Turner, 2010). Children use communication to express feelings, fulfill their needs, and interact with others (Gooden & Kearns, 2013). Communication is also necessary for learning activities and significantly influences academic achievements (Dolgova et al., 2019). Therefore, communication skills become increasingly important in middle childhood. During this period, children begin to develop self-concept in terms of academic and social competence. Middle-aged children begin expanding their relationships outside the family, being deeply concerned with having friends and

friendships and gaining acceptance from the surrounding community (Berk, 2013; Woolfolk & Perry, 2014).

Communication skills refer to many skills needed for individuals to succeed in social relations and personal goal achievements in acceptable ways (Hargie, 2019; Russell, 2007). Several experts (Papalia & Fieldman, 2015; Santrock, 2019; Berk, 2018) mention many aspects of children's communication skills that can be grouped into structural and pragmatic language skills. Structural language skills emphasize the ability to produce language according to the rules, including grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Pragmatic language skills focus on the use of language, verbal and non-verbal, according to the context of social interaction.

Communication skills develop in children from an early age and are expected to continue improving as they grow up. In middle childhood, children are expected to be able to communicate verbally and non-verbally appropriately. They can understand language structure well, master 40,000 vocabularies, including foreign languages, and have phonological awareness that supports reading and writing skills. Children can learn a second language and beyond, including language structure, vocabulary, and the context of the language being learned (Lally & Valentine-French, 2019, Pye et al., 2022). In middle age, children are also expected to have metalinguistic awareness that makes children able to understand language rules, understand the meaning of words, and even understand how to use the language according to the culture and purpose of communication being carried out (Santrock, 2019).

With its vital function of social interaction and exchange of messages or information, a deficit in communication skills can lead to more severe problems. Children who lack communication skills may experience barriers in their learning process as they tend to feel shy and are more passive in class (Masduki et al., 2018). A lack of communication skills can also limit children's opportunities to play and achieve social integration with their environment (Prelock et al., 2011). Moreover, this lack can hinder children from learning self-regulation and varied daily living skills (Koegel, 2000). Therefore, low communication skills can predict delays in the development of children's social and emotional skills and leading to behavioral problems (Rautakoski et al., 2021).

Considering the various impacts that can be resulted, communication skills deficits need to be identified and prevented since early stage. In this case, the child's immediate environment plays a crucial role. Parents and teachers are expected to pay attention and be sensitive to the gap between children's communication performance and their age. Practitioners also should be able to carry out a careful assessment of children's communication development. This efforts require measurement that can provide information about children's communication development and aspects of skills that children still need to learn.

Based on a literature search conducted using Springer, Psychnet, Google Scholar, and Scopus-indexed data engines from 2010 until 2020, there were 28 studies that involved the measurement of communication skills. However, most of the measurements of communication skills in these studies were carried out in the population of children with special needs, especially in Autism Spectrum Disorders (i.e., Lane et al., 2018; Dennison et al., 2018; Greenslade et al., 2018). Of the 28 studies, three were conducted on a population of normal children (developing children) in Indonesia. All three used a measurement with the observation recording method to measure communication skills limited to a particular aspect, such as speaking skills according to the rules (Nurahman et al., 2020), oral communication skills (Ula, 2008), and skills in expressing opinions (Putra et al., 2020). It can be concluded that until now there has been no measurement of children's communication skills in Indonesia that has a comprehensive construct. Comprehensive measurement will be beneficial when an evaluation is needed to identify deficit areas in children's communication skills.

Communication is inseparable from the local cultural context (Altarriba & Brown, 2022). Communication skills are performed in a way acceptable to the local society or culture. For example, Asian children are not expected to communicate assertively and directly, let alone interrupt an adult conversation (Pitton et al., 1993). Americans view good communication as prioritizing the direct expression of one's own feelings, whereas the Japanese view good communication as prioritizing the skills to be a listener (Tobin & Davidson, 1987). From an ecological perspective, children's abilities develop under the influence of the environment and era in which they grow up (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Indonesia itself is categorized as a country with high

context culture and collectivists, so the preferred communication style is, for example, respecting elders, not interrupting when speaking, being a good listener, and using

covert body language (Gupta & Sukanto, 2020). Therefore, this study intends to produce aspects or constructs unique to the Indonesian child population and that have not appeared in the literature or previous measurements of communication skills. Construct exploration is also a significant stage in the development of measurement. Based on The Standards of Educational and Psychological Test (American Educational Research Association et al., 2014), test development begins with the specification of test content able to obtain through exploration/analysis of constructs or domains of the attributes to be measured.

Method

Research Participants

This study involved several stages of data collection and each engaged different participants. A more detailed description of each of these data collection stages is described in the research procedure. In the first stage, this study involved nine children aged 10-12. In the second stage, 24 students from grade five of elementary school were involved as participants. Then in the third stage, which used the focused group discussion (FGD), there were 15 parents as participants. These parents had children currently attending grades four to six of elementary school. Informed consent was given to all participants before the data collection process.

Design

Considering the exploratory nature of this study, which was to identify themes that characterize the construct of children's communication skills, this study used a qualitative approach. Influenced by the constructivist paradigm, the qualitative approach is suitable for exploratory studies because it allows researchers approaching the subjective reality of the individuals under study without having to bring specific theoretical hypotheses (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Crotty, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Informed by this goal, qualitative approach tends to use naturalistic research methods. Using

naturalistic research methods allows research participants to express their thoughts and experiences according to the situation felt or experienced. Through this process, qualitative research can produce insight into the phenomenon under study, especially when the phenomenon under study is still not widely examined (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017).

Procedure

Drawing on the methodological assumptions of qualitative research, which emphasizes an open and naturalistic data collection process, interviews were used as a data collection method (King et al., 2018). There were three stages of interviews conducted in this study. First, the researcher conducted group interviews with nine children aged 10-12. This interview aimed to identify various situations describing children's communication in daily life. This initial interview revealed 14 everyday situations that illustrated the types of communication children commonly did.

The fourteen types of situations were children asking for permission, refusing requests, expressing protests, explaining misunderstandings, asking to buy desired items, joking, telling stories to parents, asking questions, greeting, borrowing goods or toys, inviting to play, telling stories to friends, discussing with friends, and expressing objections. Furthermore, each type or situation of communication was illustrated in a picture story with the main character of a child named Adi. Those pictures were used as prompts for the second stage of the interview process. Here is an example of the situation presented.

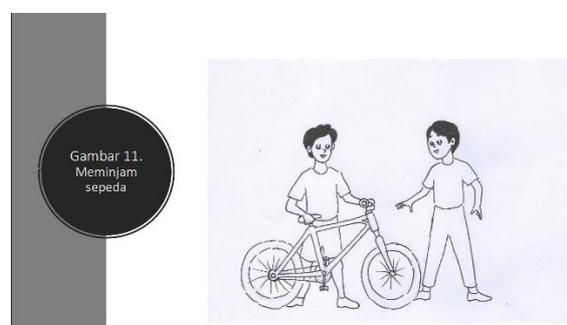


Figure 1. Example of Picture of the Situation

Using the set of pictures of communication situations as prompts, the second stage of interviews was group interviews with 24 children who were fifth-grade elementary school students. The interviews were conducted online using the zoom meeting application on the 28th of May, 2021. Online interviews were arranged due to the restrictions on activities during the pandemic. In the group interview, the students were divided into four groups. Each group consisted of six participants and two research assistants, who served as a moderator and a co-moderator. The research assistants were responsible for observing and recording responses. At the beginning of the discussion, the moderator explained the definition of communication and then asked the students for their opinions on how communication can be successful in certain situations. There were 14 situations visualized through pictures. Then, for each of them, the students were asked to respond to the core question, “How to communicate appropriately?”.

The third stage of the data collection process was the implementation of FGDs with parent, which were held online on 5 June 2021. During the FGD, parents were divided into two groups. The discussion in each group was led by one researcher and assisted by one research assistant to record responses. The core question addressed in the FGD with parents was, “What kind of communication do parents expect their school-age children in grades 4 to 6 to do?”. Before the core question was presented, the moderator explained the concept of communication to ensure similar perceptions between the parents and the researcher.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis according to Braun & Clarke (2006). This analytical technique was used because its process and stages were in line with the exploratory nature of this research. The inductive thematic analysis allows researcher to produce findings that are bottom-up or based on patterns found in the data. Since this study aimed to identify themes that characterized children’s communication skills, it needed a type of data analysis that allowed the researcher to produce findings which are in line with the actual situation felt and experienced by the participants. This consideration led to the use of inductive thematic analysis.

Technically, inductive thematic analysis was carried out through six stages of data processing, including: (1) reading the data repeatedly and transcribing, (2) initial coding, (3) finding themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) naming themes, and (6) writing the report. At the stage of reviewing themes, the research team compared the themes obtained with the opinions of seven reviewers who were asked to theme a number of responses.

Result

Thematic analysis of parents' and children's responses resulted in eight themes. Those themes included receptive skills, language accuracy, context understanding, openness, assertiveness, self-confidence, social sensitivity, and politeness. The first theme was related to receiving messages, both verbal and non-verbal messages. The second theme was more related to skills of conveying messages appropriately according to the rules in terms of sentence structure, word choice, and pronunciation. The third theme was still related to the skills of conveying messages but more in terms of pragmatics, especially in using language according to the context of the situation and the speaking partner. The fourth to eighth themes were aspects of social competence closely related to communication activities.

Receptive skills. Responses of receptive skills are expressed more by parents. Related to receptive skills, parents not only mentioned the ability of understanding verbal messages but also non-verbal messages. Parents expected children to instantly understand if parents showed approval or disapproval through non-verbal expressions.

Language accuracy. Responses related to language accuracy only emerged from the parents' group. In this theme, parents expected their children to be able to speak in correct sentences. Parents also assumed that at elementary school period, children possessed a rich vocabulary, could choose the right words, and give complete explanations. Parents expected children to be able to speak coherently, clearly, and fluently.

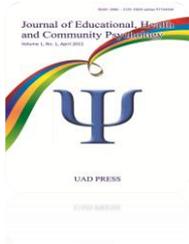
Context understanding. Responses regarding context understanding emerged from the parents' and the children's groups. In this theme, parents assumed that in elementary school, children could understand the situations and their position in social interaction, which was referred to as "*empan papan*" in Javanese. For example, children should speak more politely to older people or speak softly when they are in a meeting. These parents' expectations were in sync with children's responses. Related to theme of context understanding, children suggested to explain the reason when unable to help parents, explain the benefit of the items requested to parents to buy, and speak more politely when talking to older people.

Openness. Responses related to openness were more common in the parent's group. Parents expected children to open up and express their feelings, desires, or difficulties as they experienced. In the children's group, the theme of openness was visible from the responses about telling what they experienced to parents, with the hope that children could get help or support from parents.

Assertiveness. Responses about assertiveness emerged in both groups. Parents wanted children not only to be assertive with their parents but also with their friends. Parents wanted children to be able to state honestly about their or dislikes about something. This parental expectation was in sync with what the children said during the group interview. Some children suggested that someone who felt disturbed by the actions of others should be upfront that they felt disturbed and clarified why the actions annoyed them. The children also added that frankness should be well delivered so that the other person was not offended.

Self-confidence. This theme was emphasized more in the parents' group. Parents expected their children to be more confident when interacting with others, especially their friends, and to speak up in formal situations such as class. Parents expected children to dare to express opinions, give presentations, or ask questions. In the children's group, the theme of self-confidence appeared from answers such as daring to ask questions in class and greeting and inviting friends to chat.

Social sensitivity. Responses included in this theme emphasized the skills to understand other people's situations and to respect and support others. This theme emerged from the parents'



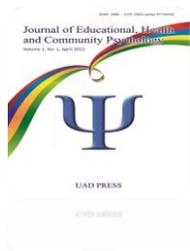
group and the children's group. Parents expected their children to be able to empathize with others or not be "ignorant", for example by listening to or respecting others who were talking and showing support to others. In the children's group, this theme was visible in the responses about listening to friends who had an opinion, not criticizing friends' ideas, and not speaking in a way that could offend friends.

Politeness. This theme seemed to somewhat overlap with social sensitivity, but politeness involved children's knowledge of manners or rules that applied in society. This theme appeared relatively more than other themes in the parents' group and the children's group. Parents assumed that at their age, children were able to use manners in communication, for example being polite in talking to the teachers, being polite in talking to or asking permission from parents, and not using harsh words or "adult" words that were not appropriate for children's age. In the children's group, this theme emerged from responses about using polite ways to ask for permission, ask questions, and greet elders.

Table 1 The Results of Thematic Analysis of Children's Communication Skills

No.	Theme	Definition	Response Excerpt	
			Parents	Children
1	Receptive skills	Skills to understand other people's messages, both verbal and non-verbal.	<p><i>Children are able to understand other people's words correctly.</i></p> <p><i>If parents disagree, children immediately understand non-verbal or code from parents.</i></p> <p><i>Children understand certain gestures that have been agreed beforehand.</i></p>	
2	Language accuracy	Skills to compose sentences, choose words and pronounce them correctly so that the message conveyed can be understood easily/clearly.	<p><i>The language is correct and clear.</i></p> <p><i>When conveying a message to a friend, it needs to be coherent and clear.</i></p> <p><i>Explaining more fully, using the right words.</i></p> <p><i>Word inflection and fluency of speech.</i></p>	
3	Context understanding	Skills to understand the situation and use language or message according to the context, both in term of the situation and the partner, so that the purpose of communication is achieved.	<p><i>For elementary school children, they can already "empan papan". They can understand the situation and their position in the situation.</i></p> <p><i>Understand the context of what they should say according to the situation. For example, when he/she has to apologize.</i></p> <p><i>When talking to younger siblings, use language that younger siblings understand.</i></p>	<p><i>When asked to sweep, he should have explained to Mum that he would finish the homework first.</i></p> <p><i>In my opinion, explaining and apologizing, because though it's not intentional, (you) still have to apologize.</i></p> <p><i>Explaining the benefits of the items to be purchased to parents.</i></p>

No.	Theme	Definition	Response Excerpt	
			Parents	Children
4	Openness	Willingness to open up and ability to express experiences or feelings experienced.	<i>Being able to express themselves as they feel. Expressing emotions as they are. Being able to express what they want.</i>	<i>Telling what happens so that their mother and father can support them. Say to the teacher, "Mam, I don't understand."</i>
5	Assertiveness	Skill to state honestly about dislikes or disadvantages in an acceptable way.	<i>Can be assertive towards friends. When being with friends sometimes his/her assertiveness disappears, not in keeping with his/her true feelings. Express likes or dislikes honestly. More critical but in an acceptable way.</i>	<i>If you ask me, just say if he/she feels annoyed but the statement should be kind so that his/her friend doesn't take offense. Just say if it hurts to be scolded.</i>
6.	Social sensitivity	Skill to understand other people's circumstances and appreciate or provide support to others.	<i>Children can also understand others. More empathetic. Able to get and give support to friends.</i>	<i>You can't, for example, harass other people. If another's opinion is bad, it shouldn't be, (you) have to respect other people's opinions. Listen first, if there's something missing then add it. Working together and speaking in turn.</i>
7	Self-confidence	Courage to initiate communication or speak in formal situations.	<i>Dare to speak up and ask questions in situations of difficulty. Trying to interact with others, being more confident or independent, taking initiative. Dare to speak up in formal situations, such as presentations.</i>	<i>Greet friends and engage them in conversation and play together. Asking news, "How are you?"</i>
8	Politeness	Demonstrate good behavior or use socially acceptable ways of communicating.	<i>Using polite words, not using words or terms that are out of line. Communicating freely but within the rules.</i>	<i>Saying, "Nderek langkung (excuse me)". Shake the hand of, speaking politely, (then) greeting, "Hello, Pakde, good morning, Pakde."</i>



No.	Theme	Definition	Response Excerpt	
			Parents	Children
			<i>Being able to communicate according to age, not thinking too maturely because of the effects of gadgets, TikTok, and others.</i>	<i>Delivering what you want to convey in an orderly and polite manner and not shouting.</i>

Discussion

This study resulted eight themes that would be placed as constructs of communication skills measurement. The eight themes found included one theme about receptive skills, two themes relating to expressive communication skills which are language accuracy and context understanding, and five themes in form social competencies closely related to communication activities. Those five were openness, assertiveness, self-confidence, social sensitivity, and politeness.

The first theme was receptive skills which include skills to understand verbal and non-verbal messages. Not much literature considered receptive communication aspects in children's communication skills (among others; Porter, 2002 and Halahan et al., 2014). Receptive skills were found in adaptive behavior scale (VABS; Sparrow et al., 2005) and achievement tests (WIAT-II; Wechsler, 2001), but not in communication skills measurements. Receptive communication is often limited to the ability to understand verbal messages or language. Therefore, the ability to understand non-verbal messages as part of receptive communication skills could be a distinctive indicator of communication skills among children in Indonesia. Parent participants in this study expected children to be able to understand non-verbal expressions when parents approved or disapproved of children's actions without having to tell them verbally. The use of non-verbal language was well-known in Javanese daily social interactions (Pranowo, 2020). In Javanese culture, children were expected to be sensitive and understand non-verbal language, such as the look in the eyes of parents who asked them to restrain themselves (Geertz, 1983).

Language accuracy is the most frequently mentioned aspect of communication skills in children. Language accuracy was commonly referred to as language structure skills (Bishop, 2013) or formal language (O'Boyle, 2013). The results of this study showed that the accuracy of language included constructing sentences correctly and coherently, choosing the right words, and pronouncing them clearly and fluently. This coverage was more or less the same as the coverage of aspects of language accuracy in many kinds of

literature (including Berk, 2012; Papalia & Duskin, 2014) and communication skills measurement (Bishop, 2013), which included grammar (syntax), word selection or vocabulary understanding (semantic) and pronunciation (speech).

Theme of understanding context included the suitability of the message conveyed by the child with the context of the situation and the interlocutor verbally and non-verbally. This concept was often referred to as speech acts in the pragmatic aspect of communication. The pragmatic aspects of communication were the most frequently mentioned in the literature regarding communication skills in developing children (including Berk, 2012 and Papalia & Duskin, 2014) and children with special needs, especially autism (Conlon et al., 2019; Hutchison et al., 2019; Foley-Nicpon et al., 2016). In the literature, pragmatic communication included speech acts and conversational skills or interactional acts such as skills in initiating and maintaining conversations (Dennison et al., 2018). In this study, responses related to conversation skills were not included in pragmatic skills alongside speech acts but were placed under the distinct theme of social sensitivity. The participants said that listening and talking in turns were actions based on respect and the ability to understand others' circumstances.

The theme of openness included the willingness to open up and express one's experiences or feelings. This theme emerged most frequently among parents. Parents wanted children to be able to express their wishes, feelings, or difficulties authentically. Children participants considered openness significant to get help or support. So far, openness was not placed as an aspect of communication skills but was more often investigated and measured specifically in studies on parent-child communication and family communication. These studies showed that open communication was necessary to create bonds in parent-child interactions (Runcan et al., 2012) and was one of the indicators of quality communication in families (Caughlin, 2003). Open communication could also prevent risky behaviors in children (Riesch, 2006).

The fifth theme, assertiveness, encompassed the ability to state honestly about likes or dislikes and disturbed feelings in an acceptable way. In this study, the theme of assertiveness emerged quite frequently from the participants, both parents and children. Responses from both groups indicated that assertively speaking was necessary for children to advocate themselves. Assertiveness was cited as one of the essential competencies in communication activities (Singhal & Nagao, 1993), but so far it has not been positioned as an aspect of communication skills measurement. Assertiveness was recognized as one of the individualistic traits (Grimm et al., 1999) and expected to be possessed by children in Western societies like Americans that prioritized individual rights and welfare (Singhal & Nagao). However, in its development, assertiveness was also expected to be possessed by children in Asia because it could prevent children from maltreatment or bullying (Schwartz et al., 2001).

Theme of self-confidence included the courage to initiate communication and the courage to express opinions or ask questions in formal situations. This theme appeared more in the parents' group. Thus far, self-confidence has been studied more as a predictor of communication skills, such as being associated with public speaking abilities (Nadiyah et al., 2019) and interpersonal communication skills (Oktary et al., 2019). Self-confidence was closely related to self-esteem, which in individualist cultures was seen as essential to be developed in individuals (Triandis & Suh, 2002).

Social sensitivity covered the ability to understand others' situations, empathize, and show appreciation or support for others, for example, by listening to others' opinions or taking turns talking. This response was present in parents' and children's groups. Social sensitivity was seen as essential for children to care for others and maintain good relationships with their peers. Understanding and respecting others to maintain social harmony was one of the characteristics of collectivist culture (Grimm et al., 1999). Furthermore, social sensitivity has not been explicitly taken into account in communication skills measurement tools but was more often included as an aspect of emotional competence (Saarni, 2007) or social competence (Nangle et al., 2010; Elliot & Gresham, 2008).

Politeness included the ability to use words or actions that were by manners to communicate. Politeness has not been placed as one of the aspects in the communication skills measurements. However, politeness was mentioned as one of the indicators of communication style in Indonesia, which is classified as having a high context culture (Gupta & Sukanto, 2020). Parent participants in this study expected their children to communicate politely, especially with older people. Behaving according to manners or norms applied in society was characteristic of collectivist culture (Triandis & Suh, 2002). A number of literature on Javanese culture (including Koentjoroningrat, 1985; Geertz, 1983) mentioned that behaving according to manners was a form of respect and was intended to maintain social harmony.

Overall, the responses from the participants were dominated by aspects of social competence rather than language or conversation skills. These results differed from the structure of communication skills in the literature (Berk, 2013; Papalia & Fieldman, 2014; Santrock, 2019) which focused more on structural (syntax and semantics) and pragmatic language skills. There are communication skill measurements that is relatively comprehensive but were often used in assessment of children with special needs. These include the Children's Communication Checklist (CCC; Bishop, 2013) which measure four aspects of language structure, four aspects of pragmatic language, and two aspects of social competence which are social interest and social interaction. The other is a construct used in a literature study on the differences in communication patterns and behavior between ASD and English language learners (Dennison et al., 2018). The differentiation of communication patterns was discussed in terms of language acquisition, pragmatic speech, non-verbal communication, and social interaction behaviors of social interest and engagement. Compared to the constructs in both studies, the communication skills structure resulting from this study contained more aspects of social competence. The results of this study indicate that the act of communication not only include social interest and involvement, but also openness, assertiveness, self-confidence, social concerns, and politeness.

Five aspects of social competence generated from this study referred to individualistic and collectivistic cultural characteristics. Openness, assertiveness, and self-confidence reflected more individualistic cultural characteristics, while social sensitivity and politeness were characteristics of collectivistic cultures. Individualism give priority to their personal goals and primarily motivated by their own preferences, needs, or rights, while collectivism give priority to harmony with others and motivated by the social norms (Triandis, 1995; Hamamura et al. 2018). This research showed that children were expected to be open, assertive, and confident in conveying their opinions or expressing their feelings, but on the other hand children were still expected to be sensitive to others' circumstances, respect others, and interact following applied manners. Children were expected to communicate with social competence that can benefit themselves while maintaining positive relationships with others.

Conclusion

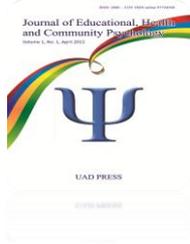
This study aimed to obtain a construct of school-age children's communication skills. Based on thematic analysis of children's and parents' responses, there were eight themes: receptive skills, language accuracy, context understanding, openness, assertiveness, self-confidence, social sensitivity, and politeness. The eight themes were quite comprehensive as a construct of communication skills, covering receptive communication, structural language, pragmatic language, and social inherent in the communication act. There were two main findings resulting from this study. Firstly, receptive communication skills also encompassed understanding others' non-verbal messages. Secondly, the structure of communication skills resulting from this study contained more aspects of social competence. The five aspects of social competence generated from this study referred to individualistic and collectivistic cultural characteristics. Families in Indonesia recently maintained the cultural values of social harmony and individualistic values that could advocate for themselves. The results of this study can be considered for development into a communication skill measurement beneficial for identifying problem areas of communication development or developing programs to improve communication skills in school-aged children in Indonesia.

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