

Integrating Lamongan Traditional Desserts into Culture-Based Instruction: A Culturally Responsive Pedagogical Approach to Enhance EFL University Students’ Critical Reading

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ABSTRACT

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, culturally responsive pedagogy has drawn more attention recently, especially in settings where globalized curricula sometimes marginalize students' cultural heritage. In order to improve university students' critical reading abilities, this empirical study explores how incorporating culture-based training focused on traditional desserts from Lamongan, East Java, Indonesia, can function as a culturally responsive pedagogical strategy. The study, which involved 33 students from Universitas Islam Lamongan's (UNISLA) English Education Department, used a classroom-based qualitative approach bolstered by reflective diaries, pre- and post-assessment, and classroom observation. After reading texts, narratives, and digital stories about Lamongan desserts including Wingko Babat, Es Siwalan, Es Bathil, and Jumbrek, the students were given critical reading assignments that emphasized moral principles, cultural symbolism, and interpretation. The results show that including local cultural elements greatly improved students' critical awareness of text-context linkages, interpretative depth, and engagement. Following the intervention, students were more equipped to recognize latent moral meanings, bias, and cultural representation in reading passages. According to the thematic analysis, culture-based education fostered intercultural awareness and cultural pride while also fostering higher-order thinking abilities that were in line with Bloom's taxonomy. Additionally, by encouraging empathy and respect for cultural variety both within and outside of the classroom, the method enhanced the affective component of learning. The study comes to the conclusion that EFL reading can be transformed from a tedious decoding assignment into a meaningful act of cultural inquiry and reflection through culturally grounded education based on local identity. It promotes greater integration of regional.

Keywords: *Culturally responsive-pedagogy; Critical reading-skills; Lamongan local-culture.*

INTRODUCTION

In the context of English Language Teaching (ELT) within non-English speaking nations like Indonesia, educators face a critical challenge: balancing the demand for global literacy with the necessity of preserving and affirming local cultural identity (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2021). English education, particularly reading instruction, is dominated by Western-authored materials that frequently marginalize students' cultural backgrounds, leading to a significant disconnect between the curriculum and learners' lived experiences (Gay, 2018). This cultural

unfamiliarity often results in low student interest, passive engagement, and shallow understanding of texts (Gay, 2000). To resolve this pedagogical conflict, the implementation of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), an approach that recognizes, values, and draws upon students' cultural knowledge as a foundation for learning, is imperative (Yule, 2020). Integrating local culture into EFL reading exercises is a viable strategy to transform the classroom into a space for critical thinking and cultural affirmation, rather than mere linguistic absorption.

The rationale for this approach is grounded in established theories. Reading is understood as a cognitive and cultural act (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983; Wallace, 2003). When learners encounter materials set in familiar cultural contexts, they can utilize schema-driven comprehension techniques, aligning with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the mediating function of culture in cognitive development. Furthermore, this method is fully consistent with Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP), as described by Geneva Gay (2000, 2018), which focuses on utilizing students' cultural knowledge and prior experiences to make learning effective. Ladson-Billings (1995, 2021) expands this to include the crucial goals of cultural competency and critical consciousness. Empirical studies in the Indonesian EFL context have consistently supported this trend: research by Agustina et al. (2003) and Edi et al. (2025) found that incorporating Javanese folklore increased empathy and interpretative depth, while Fatmawati et al. (2024) and Ismail and Abdullah (2024) highlighted the benefits of digital storytelling based on local heritage for enhancing critical reading and confidence (Levinson, 2024). It investigates how utterances depend on context to convey meaning, which is essential when analyzing discourse in both spoken and written forms. In narratives, pragmatic elements help readers uncover deeper meanings, implied references, and speaker attitudes.

Despite the promise and empirical support for culture-based instruction, EFL reading instruction at the university level in Indonesia frequently remains textually abstract and culturally distant. Textbooks often prioritize global or Western topics, leading to a lack of contextual relevance that hinders deep engagement. Preliminary classroom observations at Universitas Islam Lamongan (UNISLA) revealed a specific challenge: while students possess adequate vocabulary and grammatical skills, their critical reading scores stagnate, indicating difficulty with the inferential and evaluative aspects of comprehension. Crucially, while previous studies have successfully used folklore and general heritage, few studies have specifically examined culinary heritage—particularly regional desserts—as a focused literacy tool. This study addresses this research vacuum by using Lamongan's rich culinary

traditions (Wingko Babat, Es Siwalan, Es Bathil, Jumbrek), which represent both tangible and intangible cultural history, as authentic and highly relatable cultural anchors for critical reading development.

This study aims to investigate how culture-based training utilizing traditional Lamongan desserts can serve as a culturally responsive pedagogical strategy to improve critical reading abilities among EFL university students at UNISLA. Specifically, the research seeks to examine the effect of this instruction on students' critical comprehension, explore their perspectives and experiences, and identify effective teaching practices for integrating local culture. The study contributes significant empirical evidence for the efficacy of using local culinary heritage to foster higher-order thinking skills, aligning with Bloom's revised taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). By demonstrating that EFL reading can be transformed from a mechanical task into a meaningful act of cultural inquiry and reflection, this research supports the objectives of Indonesia's Merdeka Belajar curriculum and promotes the development of students as culturally sensitive and critically conscious global citizens.

METHODS

Research Design and Subject of Research

This study employed an empirical classroom-based qualitative design that utilized quantitative pre- and post-assessment data. The methodological framework adhered strictly to the principles of Classroom Action Research (CAR), involving an iterative and cyclical process of planning, action, observation, and reflection (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). This design was strategically chosen to enable the researcher (as instructor) and a collaborator to collaboratively explore and improve a culturally responsive teaching approach within a real-world setting. The goal was twofold: to construct an effective instructional model using traditional Lamongan desserts, and to evaluate its influence on students' critical reading skills and cultural engagement.

The subject of the research consisted of 31 first-semester students (10 males, 21 females) enrolled in the Critical Reading and Thinking in EFL course at the English Education Department of Universitas Islam Lamongan (UNISLA) during the 2025–2026 academic year. Participants were suitable candidates as they possessed intermediate English reading skills but had limited prior experience with high-level critical reading tasks, despite having strong familiarity with the local Lamongan culture..

Instrument

The core instructional materials were centered on four traditional Lamongan

desserts (*Wingko Babat, Es Siwalan, Es Bathil, and Jumbrek*). English texts were specially created for each dessert, incorporating factual, folkloric, and moral content. These texts were delivered multimodally, utilizing digital elements such as images, infographics, and short videos created with tools like Canva and Powtoon.

Data were collected using a convergent set of instruments to ensure robust triangulation:

1. Pre-and Post-Tests: Used to objectively measure progress in comprehension, inference-making, and evaluative skills. The tests were adapted from standardized EFL critical reading evaluations (Wallace, 2003) and contextualized with culturally relevant passages.
2. Classroom Observations: Captured detailed qualitative data on student participation, collaboration, and the application of critical reading skills during group work.
3. Reflective Journals: Short written observations by students after each session detailing their experiences, difficulties, and personal reflections on the cultural artifacts.
4. Semi-structured Interviews: Conducted with 10 randomly selected students at the end of each cycle to gain in-depth qualitative insights into the intervention's impact.
5. Field Notes: Taken by the teacher-researcher to track instructional flow, student reactions, and cultural conversations.

Data Collection and Analysis

The research was executed over two instructional cycles, each spanning four 90-minute meetings. Within each cycle, culture-based reading lessons were introduced, followed by student engagement in critical reading conversations. Reflections and observations were consistently gathered to inform the planning and revision of the subsequent cycle. Ethical considerations, including informed consent and data anonymization, were strictly observed throughout the process.

Data analysis followed a convergent mixed-methods approach: (1) Quantitative Data Analysis: Data from the pre- and post-tests were analyzed descriptively, primarily calculating mean score differences to objectively determine the progress in critical reading skills; (2) Qualitative Data Analysis: Data from journals, observations, and interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This involved six phases, from familiarization and initial coding to theme definition and narrative summary, resulting in emergent themes such as Cultural Resonance, Critical Awareness, and Identity Affirmation.

Trustworthiness was rigorously maintained using the criteria established by

Lincoln and Guba (1985): Credibility (through triangulation, prolonged engagement, and member checking), Transferability (through detailed contextual descriptions), Dependability (via maintained reflective journals), and Confirmability (through cross-verification by a collaborator)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that culture-based instruction using traditional Lamongan sweets significantly improved the critical reading skills of English Education students at Universitas Islam Lamongan (UNISLA). This section addresses the findings in relation to important theories and previous research on Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), critical literacy, and EFL pedagogy in Indonesia. The topic revolves around four interpretive dimensions: a) Cultural importance and identity affirmation. b) Critical literacy and interpretive engagement. c) Sociocultural empowerment via local culture. d) Implications for EFL teacher training and curriculum development.

Cultural Relevance and Identity Affirmation

The study's most significant contribution is to validate local culture as a legitimate and strong resource in EFL training. The kids' replies suggested that including Lamongan's traditional desserts; Wingko Babat, Es Bathil, Es Siwalan, and Jumbrek created an emotionally charged learning environment. These cultural texts bridged the gap between academic literacy and lived experience, supporting (Ladson-Billings, 1995) claim that culturally relevant education fosters cultural competency by connecting curriculum content to students' sociocultural realities.

In the context of Indonesian EFL education, English is frequently taught using Western literature or globally standardized materials, which may distance pupils from their cultural identity. According to Mahmud (2019), when students learn English without cultural context, they may regard the language as disconnected from their daily lives. This study, however, found that when local identity is ignored, pupils engage more fully and see English as a vehicle for self-expression rather than an external imposition.

The satisfaction students felt while reading about Lamongan's culinary tradition exemplifies a major component of CRT: validating students' cultural roots while building academic competency (Gay, 2018). It also aligns with Banks (2015) multicultural education theory, which emphasizes the importance of inclusive curricula that recognize local cultures as valuable knowledge systems. The study proved how, by transforming familiar meals into English learning content, education may serve as both cultural preservation and language empowerment.

Critical Literacy and Interpretive Engagement

Another key conclusion from the study is that culture-based training enhanced higher-order thinking and interpretative depth, shifting reading from passive comprehension to critical inquiry. Students went beyond literal comprehension to challenge authorial purpose, assess perspectives, and connect textual meanings to societal realities. This development fits with Freire (1970) concept of critical consciousness (*conscientização*), which involves learners becoming aware of the social dimensions of texts and actively interpreting meaning.

Reflective journals and classroom discussions demonstrated that students learned to view reading as a form of communication between text, reader, and culture. This method is similar to Wallace (2003) paradigm of critical reading, which promotes reading as a socially situated practice requiring cultural and ideological understanding. Students engaged in multilayered interpretation by studying how *Wingko Babat* represents communal resilience and *Es Bathil* depicts economic hardship, connecting linguistic analysis with socio-cultural critique.

Furthermore, the utilization of local digital storytelling initiatives broadened students' critical literacy to multimodal dimensions. When students developed digital stories about Lamongan desserts, they not only synthesized textual content but also visualized and articulated cultural significance. Such creative synthesis exemplifies Luke's (2012) term "critical literacy for cultural production," in which students become knowledge creators who recreate their culture using global communication means.

This shift from text consumers to meaning-makers indicates that critical reading may be fostered through culturally entrenched, creative practices, particularly when students see their own experiences reflected in the curriculum. It reinforces the view that literacy is a cultural and ideological practice rather than a neutral skill (Gee, 2007).

Sociocultural Empowerment through Local Culture

The study's findings also emphasize how culture-based training promotes students' sociocultural empowerment, particularly in Indonesian higher education settings. The students' increased awareness of cultural symbols, moral values, and social challenges surrounding Lamongan's culinary legacy represented a greater grasp of their community's identity in the context of globalization.

According to the Pancasila Student Profile, this empowerment reflects the achievement of fundamental principles such as global citizenship based on local wisdom, creativity, and critical thinking. Reading and discussing books like *Es Siwalan* or *Jumbrek* taught students to value traditional ecological knowledge and

artisanal techniques that support local economies insights that reflect Pancasila's emphasis on social justice, cooperation, and cultural continuity.

In this regard, the intervention is consistent with the Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) initiative, which promotes innovative, contextualized, and student-centered learning. By locating reading within Lamongan's cultural context, the study embodied the notion of educational autonomy: students and teachers became co-creators of meaningful learning experiences rather than passive followers of imported curriculum.

The pupils' increased cultural pride and empathy is consistent with the affective domain of CRT (Gay, 2018). When learners believe that their cultural identity is respected, they build emotional engagement and motivation that go beyond instrumental goals such as grades. This explains why attendance, involvement, and reflective depth rose during the intervention. In short, emotive involvement worked as a stimulant for cognitive growth, which supports Nieto's (2017) theory that effective education must target both the heart and the head.

Implications for EFL Teacher Education and Curriculum Design

The findings have major implications for teacher preparation and EFL curriculum development in Indonesia. First, the study shows that culturally responsive products can be created from any local environment, including something as simple and familiar as traditional food. This suggests that teachers do not have to rely simply on global or commercial textbooks, but may also become curriculum builders, localizing content to meet their students' cultural landscapes.

Teacher education programs should consequently include courses on culturally sensitive pedagogy, local content integration, and critical literacy training. Pre-service teachers must be taught in identifying culturally rich resources, creating reflective reading tasks, and leading critical discussions. As Richards (2001) points out, teacher agency in material construction is critical for encouraging contextualized learning and maintaining student involvement.

Second, including local culture in reading instruction helps to decolonize EFL education. The prevalence of Western cultural materials in Indonesian classrooms frequently portrays English as a conduit for external information, potentially disempowering students. However, as this study shows, incorporating Indonesian cultural narratives in English texts enables students to engage in global discourse while maintaining their local identity. This dual orientation being locally anchored and internationally connected exemplifies the ideals of glocal education (Merriam & Kim, 2011).

Third, the results indicate that critical reading instruction should shift from text-based comprehension to socially situated literacy. Rather than asking students to summarize texts, teachers should ask critical questions like: What ideals are expressed in this text? Who is voice is missing? What relevance does this story have to modern society? Such inquiries promote the reflective reasoning demonstrated in this study and are consistent with the higher-order thinking aims of the Indonesian National Qualifications Framework (KKNI).

Finally, the study suggests that collaborative and multimodal tactics, such as digital storytelling, group debates, and cultural mapping, should be integrated into reading classes. These strategies empower students to co-create meaning, build empathy, and convey cultural insights in English, so meeting both the linguistic and civic goals of higher education.

The findings of this study contribute to the ongoing discussion of Culturally Responsive Teaching in EFL environments. By integrating Freire's critical pedagogy and Gay's CRT framework, the study shows that local culture may serve as both content and context for transformational literacy training. This synthesis reflects (Ladson-Billings, 2021) proposal for culturally sustaining pedagogy, which aims to preserve and revitalize cultural practices through education rather than simply including them.

In practice, the Lamongan dessert-based curriculum exemplifies cultural mediation, a notion derived from Vygotsky's sociocultural theory that states that learning occurs through meaningful interaction between cultural tools and learners. Traditional foods were used as intermediary objects to connect local history with global literacy practices.

This integration also lends credence to the ecological model of language acquisition (van Lier, 2004), which sees learning as part of cultural and communicative ecosystems. When EFL reading becomes a study of one's own community, it promotes ecological awareness, identity creation, and intercultural understanding at the same time.

In summary, this study demonstrates that integrating Lamongan's traditional desserts into EFL reading lessons: a) Affirms students' cultural identity and fosters pride; b) Enhances interpretive and critical literacy skills; c) Promotes empathy and social awareness; d) Aligns with the educational philosophy of Merdeka Belajar and the Pancasila Student Profile; and e) Provides a replicable model for culturally responsive instruction in other Indonesian contexts.

Ultimately, the classroom becomes a cultural ecosystem where English functions as a medium of cultural reflection and empowerment, not just as an

academic subject. This transformation underscores the urgent need to reimagine EFL education in Indonesia as an act of cultural continuity, not cultural replacement.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of culture-based instruction centered on traditional Lamongan desserts as a culturally responsive pedagogical technique for improving critical reading skills among English Education Department students at Universitas Islam Lamongan (UNISLA). The classroom action research conclusively found that incorporating local cultural resources into English reading instruction yielded significant cognitive and affective growth. Specifically, reading materials reflecting local culture (Wingko Babat, Es Siwalan, etc.) significantly boosted students' critical awareness of text-context linkages, interpretative depth, and engagement. Students demonstrated enhanced ability to identify latent moral meanings, analyze bias, and connect textual messages to broader social and cultural contexts. Affectively, the training fostered a greater sense of pride in local heritage and encouraged intercultural awareness and empathy, transforming the students' view of English as a tool for cultural interaction. The findings strongly support the implementation of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) in the Indonesian EFL context, aligning with the theories of Gay (2018) and Ladson-Billings (2021). This study provides a practical, localized model of CRT by successfully connecting English literacy to Lamongan's culinary legacy. The results demonstrate that culture-based instruction is a robust method for developing not only language mastery but also holistic learners capable of critical thinking and cultural affirmation. This pedagogical shift directly supports national education goals, including the Pancasila Student Profile and Merdeka Belajar ideals, by grounding learning in local identity while simultaneously preparing students for global dialogue. Based on the provided text, the specific limitations of the classroom action research were not explicitly detailed (e.g., sample size restriction, time constraint, absence of a control group). A typical limitation inferred from the methodology might be: This study was limited to a single class of students at one university (UNISLA) using a classroom action research design, which affects the generalizability of the findings to different EFL contexts or educational levels. Furthermore, the reliance on reflective journals and classroom observation for affective data, while rich, may introduce subjectivity in interpretation.

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