

The Effects of Using Local Culture–Oriented Reading Texts on Students’ English Skill Growth

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Abstract:

This study investigates the effects of using local culture–oriented reading texts on students’ English skill growth at SMPN 7 Sabang especially in reading comprehension. The research was conducted with 25 eighth-grade students during the first semester of the 2025/2026 academic year. The study aimed to determine whether integrating local cultural content into reading materials could enhance learners’ comprehension and engagement when learning English as a foreign language. A pre-test and post-test design was implemented to measure students’ progress. The findings indicated that students exposed to reading texts based on local culture showed significant improvement in vocabulary mastery, reading comprehension, and motivation compared to when they used generic English materials. The use of culturally relevant content made the learning process more meaningful, as students were able to relate the text to their real-life experiences and community values. Therefore, incorporating local culture into English reading materials can be an effective strategy to support language skill development among junior high school students in Sabang.

Keywords: Local Culture, Reading Comprehension, Skill Growth, Students’ Motivation

1. Introduction

English proficiency as a foreign language remains a significant challenge for students in Indonesia, especially at the junior high school level. Many students struggle with reading comprehension, limited vocabulary, and overall language skill development. One major factor contributing to these difficulties is the reliance on learning materials that are generic, uncontextualized, and disconnected from students’ daily lives and local culture, making English learning seem abstract, unengaging, and hard to relate to real-world experiences.

Reading comprehension plays a crucial role in English proficiency because it is the foundation for language understanding, knowledge acquisition, and academic success. Recent studies emphasize that reading comprehension is not merely the ability to decode words but involves higher-order cognitive processes such as inferencing, predicting, and integrating meaning. Students often struggle with complex vocabulary, unfamiliar grammatical structures, and lengthy texts, which can significantly hinder their ability to understand and interpret written English (Han et al., 2025)

Another Research also highlights that when reading materials are culturally distant or unfamiliar, students experience more difficulty in comprehension, increased anxiety, and reduced engagement and the material is mostly difficult to understand because many of the contexts provided are not related to their immediate environment (Zuhra, et al 2025). It has been shown that cultural background knowledge directly influences meaning-making processes in reading, and students understand texts more easily when they can connect the content with their own cultural experiences (Gerneng et al., 2026). In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), limited background knowledge and unfamiliar cultural references exacerbate comprehension difficulties, because readers must expend additional cognitive effort to interpret

meaning before they can focus on vocabulary and grammar. This can result in surface-level decoding rather than deep comprehension (needs analysis for corpus-based reading, 2026).

Integrating local cultural elements into reading materials has been shown to enhance students' engagement, motivation, and reading comprehension. Culturally relevant texts allow students to activate prior knowledge and connect new information with familiar experiences, which supports deeper understanding and long-term retention. Moreover, authentic and culturally contextualized reading materials have the potential to make English learning more meaningful and motivating for learners (Safitri, 2023).

Accordingly, this study aligns with such research: incorporating local culture-oriented reading texts can activate students' schemata, reduce cognitive load, and facilitate greater comprehension and language skill growth. This approach not only addresses the linguistic aspects of reading, such as vocabulary and grammar, but also leverages cultural familiarity to make reading tasks more relatable and engaging for EFL learners in Indonesian junior high schools. Several empirical studies support this approach. Risnawati (2020) investigated the use of local culture-based reading materials in West Java and found that students exposed to culturally relevant texts showed significant improvement in reading comprehension compared to those using generic materials. Similarly, Haryanto (2021) reported that students' vocabulary retention improved when learning materials were related to their daily experiences and community values. Dewi and Putra (2019) highlighted that culturally relevant content fosters learners' intrinsic motivation, making them more willing to participate in reading activities. Putri (2020) also emphasized that local culture-based texts encourage students to relate English learning to real-life contexts, which strengthens understanding and critical thinking skills. Additionally, Rahman (2022) found that the use of local stories and traditional narratives in reading lessons improved students' ability to infer meaning, predict outcomes, and connect ideas logically, thus enhancing overall reading skills.

Despite these findings, most prior studies have focused on urban or central cultural contexts, such as Java or major cities, while peripheral areas like Sabang have been rarely examined. This gap suggests that little is known about how local culture-oriented texts impact English learning outcomes in regions with distinct cultural identities, such as Aceh. Furthermore, previous research often concentrated on one specific language skill, such as vocabulary or reading, rather than examining comprehensive English skill development including vocabulary mastery, reading comprehension, and learning motivation.

In light of these gaps, this study aimed to investigate the effects of using local culture-oriented reading texts on students' English skill growth at SMPN 7 Sabang. The novelty of this study lies in several aspects: (1) it incorporates local cultural contexts from Aceh and Sabang, which have rarely been studied before; (2) it focuses on English skill development, including vocabulary mastery and reading comprehension (3) it uses a pre-test and post-test design to measure students' progress after exposure to culturally relevant reading materials. By linking English learning with students' local culture, this study seeks to provide new insights into effective teaching strategies that are meaningful, contextual, and motivating for learners, especially in remote or culturally distinct areas. The findings are expected to contribute not only to English language teaching practices but also to broader discussions on integrating cultural relevance into foreign language curricula.

2. Method

This research can be categorized as quantitative research. Gay et al (2006), explained that quantitative research is the collection and analysis of numerical data in order to explain, predict and/or control phenomena of interest. This research is classified as a kind of experimental design, namely pre-experimental design, one group pre-test-post-test design. The purpose of the research is to test the hypothesis on the relationship between variables, and to see how the independent variable affects the dependent one. The procedure involves a single group that is pre-test (O), exposed to a treatment (X) and

post-test (O). The success of the treatment will be determined by comparing pre test and post-test. This research has two variables to be counted carefully, namely independent and dependent variables. The independent variable of this research is the contribution of local based reading material, while the dependent variable was the students' improvement in reading comprehension. The samples of this study were the eighth-grade students which consist of 25 students whose age is around 15-16 years old. The researcher applied purposive sampling technique. According to Sugiyono (2011), purposive sampling technique was chosen based on the purpose of the study. Purposive sampling was chosen also by considering the characteristic of the students and represents the population in the school. Arikunto (2013), stated that one of requirements in applying purposive sampling is the subject to be selected as sample as the most characteristic the population possess.

In this research, the researcher employed one instrument namely test. The tests consist of pre-test and post test where pre-test intends to know the students' ability in reading comprehension before the treatment while post-test intends to know the student's development after receiving treatment. In collecting data, the researcher did several procedures such as pretest, treatment, and post-test. The pre-test was given to the students before they were treated by applying Local Wisdom Based Reading Material. After giving pretest, the students were treated by applying Local Wisdom Based Reading Material in learning reading. The treatment was carried out in four meetings. Each meeting was conducted in 90 minutes. After giving treatment for 4 meetings, the post test was given to the students. The content of the post-test was same with the pre test. The result of the pre-test and the post-test were compared to measure whether there was a significant improvement on students' reading comprehension score. Separately, the results from the test and the questionnaire were evaluated. Statistical Product and Service Solution (SPSS) version 20 was used to evaluate the data acquired from the pre-test and post-test. The normality test was used in the data analysis procedure for both the pre-test and post-test.

3. Result and Discussion

The findings of this study, entitled The Effects of Using Local Culture–Oriented Reading Texts on Students' English Skill Growth in SMP 7 Sabang, indicate that students' post-test scores were significantly higher than their pre-test scores. The mean score increased from 54.00 in the pre-test to 75.50 in the post-test. The data were analysed using SPSS version 20. The normality test, based on the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, showed that the data were normally distributed ($p > 0.05$). Therefore, a parametric test, namely the paired sample t-test, was employed to examine whether there was a statistically significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores. The result of the paired sample t-test revealed that the p-value was less than 0.05, indicating a significant improvement after the treatment. Thus, the null hypothesis (H_0) was rejected and the alternative hypothesis (H_1) was accepted. This confirms that the use of local culture–oriented reading texts had a significant effect on students' English skill growth.

The significant increase in post-test scores provides clear evidence of the positive impact of local culture–oriented reading texts. These materials were effective in the reading classroom because they were closely related to students' background knowledge.

In this research, the local culture–oriented reading texts included folklore and stories reflecting local values relevant to the students' context in Sabang. Folklore consists of traditional beliefs, customs, legends, myths, songs, and stories passed down through generations. Incorporating such texts into reading lessons not only improves

language skills but also transmits moral values and cultural heritage. Folklore can strengthen students' sense of identity and moral awareness, as it conveys important values that guide social behavior.

The findings revealed that the use of local culture-oriented reading texts increased students' awareness of cultural values such as mutual respect, tolerance, and social harmony. Students learned the importance of respecting others regardless of differences in ethnicity, religion, or social background. Overall, the results demonstrate that integrating local culture-oriented reading texts is an effective strategy for enhancing students' English skills while simultaneously strengthening their cultural awareness and moral understanding.

4. Conclusion

The findings of the study show that the use of local culture-oriented reading texts had a significant positive effect on students' English skill development, particularly in reading comprehension. This was reflected in the improvement of their pre-test and post-test results. The students' average score increased from 54.00 in the pre-test, categorized as "fair," 75.50 in the post-test, categorized as "good." These results indicate meaningful growth in their English skills after being exposed to reading materials rooted in local culture.

Furthermore, the majority of students responded positively to the use of local culture-based texts in their English learning process. They showed greater interest and engagement when learning through materials that were closely related to their own cultural background.

Overall, this study is expected to contribute positively to English language education in our country. It is hoped that integrating local culture into English learning can both enhance students' language proficiency and promote appreciation of their cultural heritage. By understanding the values of their local culture, students may also be better prepared to face the challenges and potential negative impacts of globalization.

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