

# Culture and EFL Instruction: How do Eight Graders Perceive Multicultural Reading Activities in their EFL Classrooms?

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## Abstract

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the study of cultural integration in English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms. The incorporation of local culture into the EFL classroom plays a crucial role in increasing students' awareness of culture and identity maintenance. However, studies on the development of multicultural reading materials have, to the best of our knowledge, been conducted infrequently in Indonesia. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to find out students' perceptions of multicultural reading materials that we had previously developed. This is a survey-based study involving eighth-grade students in an Indonesian junior high school in Lampung. Using descriptive statistics, the collected data were analysed. The findings indicate that the participants in the study favour the implementation of the multicultural reading activities we developed. The tasks have a favourable impact on their reading skills. The implications of the findings are also examined, along with a number of suggestions for future research.

**Keywords:** EFL, culture, reading, tasks, attitude, Indonesia.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

English as a foreign language (EFL) subject in the Indonesian context has, according to the most recent curriculum, the learning objectives of enhancing oral and written communication skills, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing; increasing awareness of EFL; enhancing knowledge of the relationship between language and culture; and broadening cultural understanding. Consequently, students must possess cross-cultural understanding and be able to engage with cultural diversity.

Moreover, in recent decades, there has been an increasing interest in EFL education materials that are culturally recognisable. Students make large language improvements while reading culturally familiar items, and informal feedback implies they enjoy and are more motivated to study these materials (Sheridan *et al.*, 2020). The inclusion of local culture in the instructional materials frequently aroused their interest and improved their willingness to engage. As a result of their significantly greater interest and perceived expertise in the self-selected themes, they demonstrated that allowing autonomy in the selection of materials increases communication willingness (Mahardika, 2017; Sheridan *et al.*, 2020). Other studies have

demonstrated that subjects of self-determined interest coupled with a high level of background knowledge result in improved reading comprehension and vocabulary retention.

Numerous studies have explored the influence of incorporating local culture into EFL classroom learning materials and found beneficial results. For instance, the reading passages and exercises in Finnish middle school EFL textbooks are diverse (Heininen, 2021). It is more effective to improve children's academic performance in Indonesia by teaching them intercultural speed-reading practises (Fatmawati, 2021). Therefore, for the development of instructional materials for junior high school students in Indonesia, a sociolinguistic approach in a multicultural context is employed (Susilawati, 2020). Students that participated in a multicultural literacy programme had larger increases in their reading and writing skills, as well as their attitudes towards writing, cultures, and technology, compared to students who utilised standard reading approaches (Isariyawati *et al.*, 2020; Moore-Hart & Margaret, 1995; Tran & Duong, 2018).

Reading is a complex process requiring different skills, as it involves a number of purposes and

techniques (Grabe, 1991). Additionally, the reader's prior knowledge is necessary for comprehension (Day and Bamford, 1998) as readers view texts differently depending on the schemata triggered by the text (Nuttall, 2000). Reading, unlike speaking, is clearly a learned skill that must be explicitly taught (Shaywitz, 2003; Koda, 2007). Therefore, reading instruction and how a student learns to transform symbols into sounds and, ultimately, into words, sentences, and paragraphs with meaning are vital (Shaywitz, 2003).

When addressing reading acquisition, home culture and parental role must also be considered. This includes the quantity and quality of parental speech as children learn to speak and extend their vocabulary well before entering school (Risley, 2005), in addition to parent-pre-schooler reading experiences, which are connected with growth in lexical and semantic linguistic content and the development of literacy (Muter, 2005). As a result, a person's early life experiences impact his or her future intellect. In this regard, parents play a crucial role in the development of their children's reading skills by laying a strong oral foundation for reading acquisition. Evidently, language reading abilities are equivalent in terms of cognitive processing; yet, changes in the orthography of the language influence the time required to acquire reading and the degree of difficulties certain students may have (Lindan-Thompson and Vaughn, 2007).

In the Indonesian setting, however, studies on the development of multicultural reading materials have been conducted infrequently. We eventually designed and developed multicultural reading exercises to improve students' reading comprehension because the diversity of students' languages, cultures, and ethnicities can have an impact on how the teacher manages teaching-learning. Therefore, the purpose of this article was to investigate how students perceived the multi-culture-based reading activities we developed.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Reading is a mental activity that a reader recognises, learns, and comprehends, which is a talent that involves analysing the ideas of others and expressing them through language (Nunan, 1999). In addition, it covers the processing of written words and extremely sophisticated cognitive operations. It is also the active psychological process of establishing a connection with print and checking comprehension in order to communicate (Simanjuntak, 1988). Reading is an element of EFL instruction in schools, with the objective of increasing students' reading comprehension.

Regarding reading comprehension, it is defined as a complex action requiring the conscious and unconscious application of several strategies, including problem-solving skills, in order to develop a mental model of the author's intended meaning.

Comprehension is essential for reading tasks. Therefore, reading and understanding are associated (Johnston as cited in Mikulecky, 1990). It is the skill of extracting meaning from written language in which the interaction occurs between the text and the reader's prior knowledge, utilizing cognitive and metacognitive strategies to attain comprehension (Lems, 2012). It is the process of concurrently extracting and producing meaning through interaction and engagement with written language, involving the reader, the text, and the activity. It includes all the skills, abilities, information, and experience that a reader brings to the act of reading when viewing the reader as a whole (Snow, 2002).

It is the process of concurrently extracting and producing meaning through interaction and engagement with written language, involving the reader, the text, and the activity. It includes all the skills, abilities, information, and experience that a reader brings to the act of reading when viewing the reader as a whole (Anderson, 2003). Despite their widespread use in EFL textbooks and materials, students frequently struggle with proper nouns such as Western names and locales (Jalilifar & Assi, 2008). Brown & Lee (2015) contend that learners are more likely to acquire new grammatical, lexical, and conversational forms when presented with a task in a familiar environment. Over the past two decades, there has been a movement in language instruction towards maintaining culturally identifiable contexts (Mizumura, 2015). Additional study centred on the cultural schema theory indicates that cultural adaptation in EFL programmes can be quite effective, particularly in Middle Eastern contexts. As English continues to become a global language, it becomes ever more important to evaluate the effectiveness of various EFL teaching strategies.

Incorporating culture into language learning courses is not difficult; it can be done easily and simply. One technique for incorporating local culture into learning materials is to include it in the language textbook, which is the predominant learning tool in EFL and ESL settings (Ahmadi & Shah, 2014). The additional reading module created for students and teachers might include local material. Reading materials, for instance, are derived from traditional folklore, cultural practises, food, games, dance, etc. of the numerous ethnic groups (Malaysians, Indians, Chinese, Eurasians, Ibans, Kadazans, etc.). The production of language resources was to be conducted with a practical focus on the culture and context of the learners, focusing not only on the linguistic aspect of the language, but also on how it may be used by students in any contemporary communicative event and setting. Students are more motivated to learn English when resources are more closely connected with their culture (Estuarso *et al.*, 2017), hence improving their extrinsic motivation and interest in the topic (Royani, 2013). In addition, this coincides with multicultural education, which emphasises content integration, the

knowledge production process, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and a school atmosphere and social structure that are conducive to learning. The knowledge creation process emphasises how instructors aid students in learning, investigating, and discovering how biases, frames of reference, and perspectives within a field influence how knowledge is generated within it (Banks, 1995).

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Participants of the Study

The participants of the study eighth-grade students in a junior high school in Lampung, Indonesia. After implementing multi-cultural reading resources in the EFL classroom, students were invited to complete a questionnaire. By completing the survey, they consented to the use of their data for research purposes exclusively, with their anonymity assured.

#### 3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

A questionnaire was adopted to collect data regarding the students' perceptions of the multicultural reading activities that were implemented. The survey contained five responses, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The instrument contained 17 items, with a focus on three aspects

including content aspect, layout aspect, and general aspect of the reading materials. Before the questionnaire was used to collect data, it was pilot-tested on 50 students who were not involved in the study to determine its validity and reliability. The questionnaire was confirmed to be valid and reliable (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.860). After completing the multicultural reading tasks, the students were invited to complete the questionnaire at the conclusion of class. The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistics in terms of frequencies and percentages.

### 4. RESULTS

This section covers the research findings addressing how students perceive the implementation of multi-culture-based reading tasks. The findings are presented as follows:

#### 4.1 Content Review Aspect

Figure 1 displays the responses of the students' perceptions on the content review aspect of multicultural reading tasks implementation. It can be seen that the majority of respondents express agreement and strong agreement. None of them select the other responses.

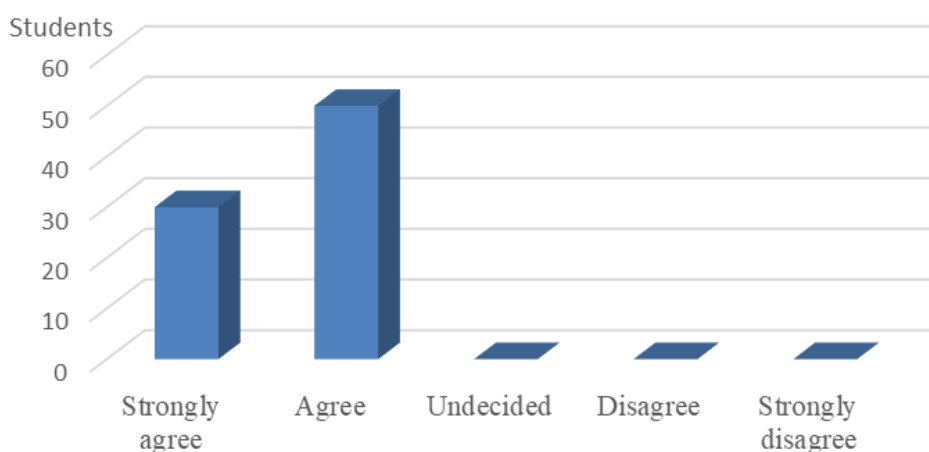
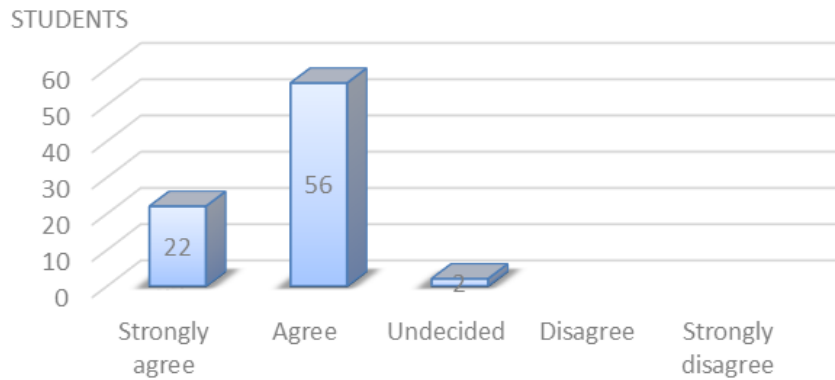


Figure 1: Participants' Responses to Content Review Aspect

#### 4.2 Layout Aspect

Figure 2 displays the responses of the participants regarding the format of the multicultural reading materials. It is evident that the majority of respondents agree or strongly agree with the cultural

content of the reading materials, with only two choosing the undecided option. That is, they either agree or disagree with the cultural content offered in the reading materials.

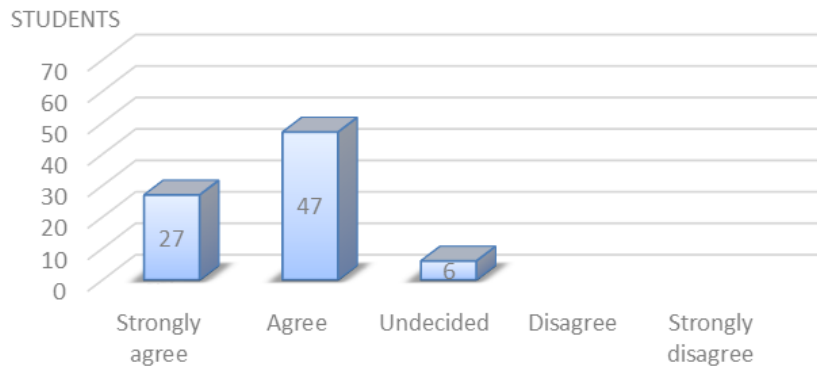


**Figure 2: Participants' Responses to Layout Aspect**

#### 4.3 General View Aspect

The responses of the participants to the general perspective portion of the multicultural reading materials we developed are provided below. It can be observed that the most frequent responses are strongly

agree and agree, with just six choosing the undecided option. This means that they either agree or disagree with the multicultural aspect of the reading materials we developed (Figure 3).



**Figure 3: Participants' Responses to General View Aspect**

## 5. DISCUSSIONS

This section includes the study's discussion addressing the student's perspective on the implementation of the multi-culture-based reading activities. After implementing the multicultural reading tasks in the classroom, the majority of students see them favourably, feeling that they are entertaining and enjoyable. In addition, they believe that the exercises are engaging and more effective for implementing in reading instruction, which is useful for enhancing their reading comprehension.

Language acquisition and socialisation are two sides of the same coin, as has been widely stated in the literature, because language acquisition is heavily influenced by the process of becoming a competent member of society, which is largely recognised through language, by acquiring knowledge of its function, social distribution, and interpretations in and across socially defined situations. Clearly, students are socialised at a young age into culturally unique modes of organising knowledge, reasoning, and communication style

through a variety of techniques. Undoubtedly, culture-specific communication skills and socialisation patterns play a crucial role in language acquisition and skill development (Minami and Ovando, 2004; Sukirman and Setiawan, 2022). The term culture refers to the behaviours, practises, attitudes, traditions, values, and beliefs of a community, as well as its learning culture. Students' expectations regarding how EFL would be taught (Tomlinson, 2005; Aronin and Spolsky, 2010). Certain cultures and their preferred learning (Tomlinson, 2005) prioritise authoritative teaching strategies, whereas memory is prominent in particular educational situations (Aronin and Spolsky, 2010). In some cultures, instructional materials are supposed to emphasise grammatical teaching, but in others, reading texts take precedence (Ur, 2012). Clearly, English language learners bring a range of traits to the classroom, including cultural and linguistic expertise; nonetheless, they are sometimes forced to manage complex training processes that differ from their own learning experiences, which hinders their reading acquisition (Orosco and O'Connor, 2014; Snow, 2002).

The finding also supports prior research conducted by Hasibuan, Hadi, and Sumarsih (2017), who investigated the students' response on the use of multiculturalism-based speed-reading skills teaching materials to increase the students' learning achievements. Nearly eighty percent of research participants were found to be in favour of utilising the created material. The results demonstrate that the results of students utilising the generated instructional materials are superior to those of students using textbooks. Chen & Graves (1995) also examined previewing and presenting preliminary information. They reached a similar conclusion that providing context could aid students in better comprehension. According to Erten and Razi (2009), many actions (such as a combination of previewing, providing keywords, scanning, skimming, clarifying, asking and answering questions, and reaching a conclusion) improved reading comprehension.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicated that students view the implementation of multicultural reading activities favourably. The tasks have a positive effect on their reading ability. They regard multicultural reading tasks to be an effective and advantageous method for teaching reading. In addition, they believe that it makes learning to read easier. In conclusion, the students agree that multicultural reading materials are effective and beneficial for them.

The findings suggest that the integration of local culture should be emphasised to EFL learners in the classroom. In doing so, students will be able to maintain their identity and increase their cultural awareness. This understanding is essential in today's international society. Nonetheless, there are limitations to this study. Therefore, future research should incorporate a larger sample size and more advanced data analysis techniques. Studies from a wider range of geographic regions are required to confirm the current findings.

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