

Primary English Teachers' Beliefs on Integrating Cultural Contexts for Literal Comprehension: A Case Study

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Abstract

The integration of cultural contexts plays a vital role in English language learning, particularly in enhancing students' literal comprehension and foundational level of reading skills. Young learners often struggle to perceive unfamiliar cultural references in texts, which can interrupt their understanding. This study examined primary English teachers' beliefs about incorporating cultural elements such as local customs, values, and social practices into reading instruction to enhance literal comprehension. Using a qualitative case study approach, data for this study were collected through a narrative inquiry form with nine primary private school teachers. Additionally, instructional documents, including lesson plans, were analyzed. A thematic analysis revealed that, although teachers strongly believe in the necessity of integrating real-life cultural contexts, they face significant challenges in finding relevant materials. Despite these challenges, teachers successfully improved students' literal reading comprehension by adapting existing texts to reflect their local environments, transforming cultural unfamiliarity into an opportunity for contextual learning.

Keywords: *cultural integration, curriculum development, education, literal reading comprehension, teacher beliefs*

Introduction

Reading comprehension is a fundamental skill in English language education, particularly at the primary school level, where students begin to engage with texts in a second or foreign language (Zhu et al., 2020). Among the various levels of understanding (e.g., literal, inferential, and critical), literal comprehension refers to the ability to understand the explicit information contained in the text. This is often the first and most essential step toward a deeper understanding of the text. However, for primary students in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), literal comprehension can be delayed by unfamiliar cultural references embedded in English texts.

When students encounter content that reflects foreign social customs, values, or norms, their ability to decode meaning can be impaired, leading to superficial or inaccurate understanding (Wang et al., 2024). Likewise, Bensalah and Gueroudj (2020) showed that EFL learners often struggle with basic understanding when they lack the necessary cultural knowledge, highlighting how unfamiliar cultural content can affect the most basic understanding. In response to this challenge, researchers have emphasized the importance of integrating cultural context into English language instruction. According to Nirmala et al. (2025), recognizing students' cultural identities in the classroom boosts their confidence and engagement, fostering deeper reading motivation. Awe et al. (2024)

empirically demonstrated in an Indonesian context that using local stories and cultural references directly increased primary students' engagement and facilitated an understanding of textual meaning.

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT), which recognizes and integrates students' cultural backgrounds into the learning process, has been demonstrated to improve engagement, comprehension, and critical thinking (Wang et al., 2024). On the other hand, Gay (2002) described CRT as the use of various students' cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and academic approaches to improve learning relevance and effectiveness. In EFL settings, this strategy involves adapting teaching materials and methods to students' local cultures while also exposing them to global perspective. In a diverse setting like Indonesia, it is crucial for teachers to design reading lessons that reflect their students' identities in order to increase engagement (Maulana, Yulianawati, & Anggrarini, 2025). Moreover, this approach cultivates the creative and communicative skills essential for global citizenship (Nurramadhani et al., 2025).

Teachers' beliefs are defined as a fundamental and subjective knowledge framework based on their personal and professional experiences. This framework involves a set of extensive beliefs that enclose the attitudes, values, and judgements and constructs their pedagogical philosophy (Boubris & Haddam, 2020). These beliefs are important because they serve as internal filters that directly shape instructional decisions, define learning objectives, choose teaching methodologies and materials, and direct patterns of interaction in the classroom. Teachers' approaches are influenced by their theoretical beliefs about the reading process and comprehension. Research shows that teachers, whether consciously or unconsciously, follow a particular reading model, a systematic theory of how reading operates.

This orientation is consistently reflected in their observable teaching practices. As a result, teachers' belief systems not only determine their teaching actions but also influence students' perceptions of literacy learning. Empirical evidence showed differences in classroom dynamics based on the teachers' underlying belief structure. Borg (2005) argues that teacher cognition, including beliefs, knowledge, and attitudes, influences classroom practices and professional development. Teachers typically operate within implicit models of reading that prioritize either decoding, interpretation, or cultural relevance. In the context of EFL education, understanding teachers' beliefs about culture and comprehension can provide valuable insights into how pedagogical choices are made and how the curriculum can be improved to support literacy development.

Several studies have explored the intersection of teacher beliefs and culturally responsive pedagogy. For instance, Wang et al. (2024) conducted a qualitative study about EFL teachers' beliefs in integrating cultural context. It revealed that while teachers acknowledged its importance, they often lacked the training and resources to implement it effectively. Likewise, Kong et al. (2022) highlighted the tension between curriculum mandates and local cultural relevance in rural Chinese schools. These studies underline the need for context-specific investigations into how teachers perceive and apply cultural integration in reading instruction. Similarly, Muniroh et al. (2024) identified parallel barriers in Indonesia, including a heavy reliance on standardized textbooks and limited institutional support for teachers attempting cultural adaptation.

In the Indonesian context, where English is taught as a foreign language in primary schools, there are limited studies on how the cultural context is incorporated into reading comprehension strategies. However, Siregar et al. (2023) have recently developed a culturally responsive English teaching model for primary schools in Indonesia. The result suggests that integrating students' local culture experiences can improve their

engagement and learning outcomes in English. Instead, Halim (2020) argues that Indonesia's national curriculum still lacks explicit emphasis on cultural responsiveness and the teachers often have to take the initiative to bring local culture into their lessons. Given the cultural diversity of Indonesia, exploring teachers' beliefs in this area is necessary. This study seeks to fill that gap by examining how primary English teachers conceptualize and implement cultural integration to support literal comprehension.

This study focused on the intersection of teacher beliefs and literal reading comprehension in private primary education in Indonesia. This topic has been largely overlooked by broader curriculum studies. This study offers unique insights into how localized cultural realities can influence primary vocabulary and text decoding by examining the internal frameworks and practical adjustments of frontline practitioners. The study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are primary English teachers' beliefs about the integration of cultural context into reading instruction for literal comprehension?
2. How do these beliefs influence their instructional strategies and material selection in reading instruction for literal comprehension?
3. What challenges and opportunities do teachers perceive in applying cultural context to support students' literal comprehension?

Method

This study employed a qualitative research design using a narrative inquiry approach. Narrative inquiry is particularly well-suited for exploring teachers' lived experiences, beliefs, and instructional practices through the stories they tell. It enables the examination of how primary English teachers construct meaning around cultural integration in reading instruction and how their beliefs influence classroom decisions. The selection of a qualitative, narrative design is appropriate because the goal is to explore the depth of human experience and professional meaning-making, which cannot be achieved through numerical data. As Cresswell (2014) states, a narrative study is a design of inquiry in which the researcher studies the lives of individuals and asks them to provide stories about their lives. This study specifically focuses on professional narratives to uncover the chronological flow and contextual influences of the teachers' experiences, allowing for the formation of holistic case studies.

The research was conducted in selected private primary schools located in Malang, East Java, Indonesia, where English is taught as a foreign language. The schools represented a mix of urban and semi-urban settings, reflecting varied instructional environments. Through purposeful sampling, nine primary English teachers were selected as participants. The chosen sampling strategy was appropriate to recruit individuals who were uniquely positioned to provide relevant and diverse insights into the integration of cultural contexts in literacy teaching; all selected participants possessed at least one year of teaching experience and were actively involved in primary reading instruction.

Data collection primarily employed two sequential, non-verbal, and textual methods: narrative inquiry forms and document analysis of lesson plans, which served to triangulate the data and offer tangible evidence of the teachers' reported instructional practices. The narrative inquiry form acted as the core instrument. Rather than a standardized survey, it was designed as a structured prompt for reflective storytelling written in English, organized into three thematic sections: the teachers' professional journeys and teaching philosophies, their specific experiences with successfully or unknowingly integrating cultural elements, and their reflections on developing literal text

comprehension. To complement these forms, participants submitted one to two recent reading lesson plans. A standardized content analysis framework was developed to examine these instructional artifacts, focusing on the explicit presentation of cultural content, whether the integration was superficial or deeply embedded, and the alignment between the activities and literal comprehension objectives.

The actual data collection procedure was managed systematically to ensure completeness and quality. Participants completed the narrative inquiry forms at their own convenience, with the researchers providing continuous guidance and support via WhatsApp chat to clarify questions and encourage detailed responses. Upon receiving the completed forms, the researchers conducted a preliminary review for completeness, following up via WhatsApp for elaboration on any underdeveloped points in their stories, which acted as a preliminary form of member checking. A detailed log was maintained for the submitted lesson plans to verify their relevance. To maintain strict confidentiality and preserve data correlation throughout the analysis phase, a unique identifier was immediately assigned to each participant's narrative and corresponding lesson plans upon receipt.

Data were analyzed inductively using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, themes, and variations across the cases. The analysis strictly followed Braun and Clarke (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. To construct comprehensive case studies, the narrative inquiry forms were analyzed using Clandinin and Connelly (2000) three-dimensional narrative space (time, place, and social interaction) to understand the coherence and structure of each teacher's story. Concurrently, the collected lesson plans underwent content analysis to evaluate how cultural contexts were explicitly represented or omitted. Finally, a cross-case analysis was conducted, synthesizing the themes from the forms with the findings from the document analysis to uncover shared patterns and divisions across all nine participants.

This study was guided by Lincoln and Guba (1985) foundational criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, to establish the overall trustworthiness of the qualitative findings. Credibility was achieved through prolonged engagement across multiple data collection phases, the triangulation of self-reported narratives with concrete lesson plans, and member checking, where participants verified their drafted narrative summaries. Transferability was addressed by providing thick descriptions of the specific school settings and participant contexts in Malang, allowing future researchers to judge the applicability of the findings to similar environments. Dependability was secured by maintaining a comprehensive audit trail that precisely documented raw data, coding schemes, thematic matrices, and procedural notes. Finally, to ensure confirmability and minimize researcher bias, the researchers maintained a detailed reflexive journal to acknowledge personal assumptions, and conducted periodic peer debriefing sessions with an external academic colleague to provide an impartial critique of the thematic interpretations.

Results

The analysis of the nine primary English teachers' narrative inquiry forms and their corresponding lesson plans revealed a clear divergence between the teachers' strong theoretical beliefs and the implicit presence of cultural elements in their actual instructional materials. Regarding teachers' beliefs, the participants, who operate within

Javanese, Madurese, and Sundanese student demographics, unanimously reported that integrating cultural context requires connecting real-life, familiar settings to reading materials. They noted that while text familiarity increases student excitement, diverse cultural backgrounds inside a single classroom make reading instruction highly challenging. To make these cultural references accessible, the analyzed lesson plans showed that teachers frequently utilized text simplification and localized illustrations, such as placing dialogues in traditional markets or parks, to activate students' cultural schemata before reading. The specific perspectives shared by the teachers regarding these instructional beliefs and practices are systematically compiled in Table 1.

Table 1. Teachers' Narratives on Cultural Integration and Literal Comprehension

Participant	Primary Instructional Experience	Perceived Impact on Literal Comprehension
K	"Cultural context makes reading more difficult when the students... are from many kinds of cultural backgrounds."	"The cultural references provide meaningful context that supports their word recognition..."
EK	"It is easier when I give text including some pictures related to it."	"All we need is the students' attention and to design the materials properly."
LI	"Sometimes cultural context makes reading more difficult when the text includes complex vocabulary..."	"I use foods and beverages that are familiar or might be their favourite [to increase engagement]."
RFA	"I taught a story about Eid Al-Fitr celebrations and related it to the students' real experiences..."	"One of the biggest challenges... is finding reading materials that match students' cultural backgrounds."
FKM	"When I plan reading lessons, I usually think about the context and the topic of the text that I will give to student. I often select reading materials that easy to understand."	"[Cultural context] allows the students to imagine and understand the text easily."
DR	"I usually think about students understanding in written, reading, and also spoken vocabularies they'd learn."	"One of the biggest challenges... is exchanging culture through the different cities..."

In terms of classroom instructional practices, the data showed that all nine teachers prioritize vocabulary, text length, and the narrative arc when designing reading lessons to ensure the content connects directly to daily student experiences. During reading activities, teachers explicitly leveraged highly familiar concepts, such as local holiday celebrations or favorite foods, to prompt literal comprehension. According to the narrative forms, this strategy triggered positive student dynamics, causing learners to share personal stories and recognize target words faster because the terminology matched their daily auditory environments. However, the lesson plan analysis revealed a procedural gap: while all teachers successfully planned pre-reading schema-building and post-reading literal interpretations, many failed to script active teacher prompts to clarify unfamiliar foreign terms during the main while-reading phase. This operational disconnect was frequently caused by institutional friction, particularly when teachers were forced to adhere strictly to reference books that did not align with the local environment.

The final layer of data analysis underlined the distinct challenges and opportunities encountered during implementation. The teachers collectively agreed that presenting unfamiliar Western traditions, such as snow, Halloween, or Christmas, or historical Indonesian customs that no longer exist in modern lifestyles created severe comprehension barriers for Gen Z students. These text barriers were further compounded by systemic limitations, including strict time constraints, classroom management pressures, and conflicting national versus international curriculum mandates. Despite these hurdles, the empirical data reflected a heavily resilient outlook. The teachers uniformly observed that utilizing culturally adapted texts maximized student enthusiasm and engagement. Consequently, their professional recommendations for incoming educators emphasized initiating reading blocks with simple, localized topics before gradually introducing global cultural frameworks.

Discussion

The empirical findings of this study demonstrate that cultural integration plays a foundational role in developing primary students' literal comprehension within EFL classrooms. The strong belief expressed by the teachers regarding the necessity of connecting reading materials with students' lived experiences aligns with a broader contemporary shift in education that recognizes a student's cultural background as a primary asset in the learning process. In the localized Indonesian context, Nurbatra and Masyhud (2022) emphasize that providing students with the skills needed to navigate an interconnected world requires teachers to be intentionally culturally responsive. The clear preference among participants for reliable texts that reflect local cultures directly supports the cognitive load theory principle that familiar contexts reduce the mental energy required to process new information (Sweller, 1988). This principle is particularly relevant given the limited capacity of working memory. When students simultaneously decode unfamiliar vocabulary and process unfamiliar cultural information, they may experience greater extraneous cognitive load, leaving fewer cognitive resources. Furthermore, the systematic integration of local values observed in this study mirrors the assertions of Dartini et al. (2025) who emphasize the importance of incorporating local wisdom values into primary education to anchor students' character and identity. By consciously embedding local customs into daily reading tasks, teachers help students understand, preserve, and validate their cultural identities, which are fundamental to national education values.

This strategic integration of culture into the literacy curriculum exerts a significant impact on students' capacity to comprehend explicit textual data. The participating teachers conceptually describe culture as a functional bridge that enables primary learners to navigate explicit information in a second language text more easily. The findings indicate a strong positive correlation between cultural schema activation and a students' ability to comprehend literal meaning. When reading materials reflect Indonesian local realities, such as Eid Al-Fitr celebrations or familiar traditional foods, students successfully bypass the cognitive demands of interpreting foreign concepts and concentrate entirely on decoding the target language. This phenomenon aligns with the study of Zhu et al. (2020), which establishes that cultural familiarity serves as an essential instructional scaffold for basic literacy. Likewise, (Ratminingsih et al., 2020) demonstrated that utilizing local culture-based storybooks in Indonesian primary schools significantly improved baseline reading competence, reinforcing the perspective that culturally familiar content optimizes literal comprehension.

Conversely, the data clearly indicate that unfamiliar cultural contexts, including Western winter traditions, Halloween, or distinct Anglo-Saxon social norms, create immediate cognitive barriers to literal comprehension. When students lack a specific cultural schema, they find it difficult not only to make deeper inferential conclusions but also to comprehend simple, explicit information. This barrier is clearly visible when examining the specific reflections of the classroom practitioners:

"However, sometimes cultural context makes reading more difficult when the students in the class are from many kinds of cultural backgrounds and the text talks about one culture that is unfamiliar to some of them." (Participant K)

"Sometimes cultural context makes reading more difficult when the text includes complex vocabulary or uses advanced grammar forms." (Participant LI)

This breakdown in comprehension directly aligns with the findings of Wang et al. (2024), who argue that without background information, text meaning becomes severely limited for young learners.

Despite the teachers' strong theoretical acceptance of culturally responsive teaching, the results indicate that its practical implementation remains divided and is generally assigned to the borders of the reading assignment rather than the reading process itself. Instructional materials and lesson plans show that cultural content is most consistently discussed in pre-reading and post-reading activities, but is rarely injected during the active, while-reading stage. During pre-reading, teachers regularly activate cultural schemas by discussing familiar foods, local markets, holidays, or classroom routines, a practice that aligns with the principles of culturally responsive teaching articulated by Gay (2002), which encourages building bridges between cultural knowledge and new content. However, most lesson plans failed to include explicit instructions or scripts for teachers to actively clarify unfamiliar cultural elements during the reading process.

This operational disconnect reveals a clear gap between teachers' abstract beliefs and their actual instructional practices. Without explicit scaffolding during text interaction, students are left to interpret foreign elements independently, frequently resulting in an inaccurate understanding of raw facts. While post-reading assignments that ask students to relate textual information to their own experiences can support personal meaning-making, they cannot replace the interactive scaffolding that was missing during text processing. Therefore, teachers' instructional practices only partially align with their stated beliefs; they deeply value culture but inconsistently incorporate it across the entire reading cycle. Ali et al. (2022) described this as an inefficient pedagogical approach, an evaluation reflected in the gaps identified in this study. This difference between professional belief and classroom practice is not an isolated phenomenon; Koşar and Dolapçioğlu (2021) similarly observed that foreign language teachers often struggle to execute practices that align with their internal frameworks, highlighting a persistent global gap between teacher cognition and classroom actions.

Regardless of receiving technically sufficient instruction, primary students often demonstrate reading skills that fall below the expected standard when adaptive support is absent. Ruotsalainen et al. (2022) emphasized that young students' reading outcomes are closely linked to teachers' abilities to manage instruction and provide real-time, responsive scaffolding. By limiting cultural integration to the pre- and post-reading perimeters, teachers fail to deliver the adaptive instruction required at the exact moment students encounter text friction. The regular inclusion of post-reading tasks requiring literal interpretation shows intent, but the absence of prompts during the reading process

indicates that instructional management is not yet fully optimized. Fortunately, the data also show that when teachers receive targeted professional support or build their confidence, they successfully shift these challenges into opportunities for development. This potential for professional growth aligns with Wu et al. (2025) who indicate that resource limitations heavily influence how teachers conduct their teaching, as well as Zolotarev et al. (2025), who found that experienced teachers employ critical reflection to connect personal experiences with social issues, helping them integrate culture more authentically.

Conclusion

This study examined primary English teachers' beliefs and actual instructional practices regarding the integration of cultural context to support literal reading comprehension in EFL classrooms. The findings reveal that while teachers strongly maintain a theoretical belief in the value of cultural integration as a vital pedagogical tool to improve students' engagement, a significant gap remains between these beliefs and their actual classroom execution. Teachers successfully integrate elements of local culture during pre-reading and post-reading perimeters, but they rarely provide explicit, adaptive scaffolding during the active while-reading stage to clarify unfamiliar cultural references. Despite facing system-level challenges, including limited resources, rigid curriculum frameworks, and the difficulty of navigating diverse student demographics, teachers still view cultural adaptation as a profound opportunity to make reading texts more accessible.

This research moves the body of scientific knowledge forward by providing concrete empirical evidence of how teacher cognition operates regarding literal text processing within localized, non-Western primary environments, shifting the academic conversation from merely advocating for culturally responsive teaching to identifying the exact operational phases where classroom scaffolding breaks down. However, a key limitation of this study is its qualitative case-study design, which focuses on a small sample of nine private primary school teachers within a single Indonesian city (Malang). Consequently, these specific instructional patterns may not capture the full variance of public-school settings, meaning the findings should be generalized with caution.

Based on these research implications, future studies should implement longitudinal designs to track how specific teacher professional development programs translate culturally responsive frameworks into real-time while-reading scaffolding. Furthermore, curriculum designers should develop instructional materials that authentically balance local and global cultures using explicit teacher scripts, while policymakers must provide frontline educators with greater professional flexibility and resources to customize standardized national curricula, ensuring that cultural integration becomes a systematic component of primary language education.

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