

STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON READING CIRCLES WITH LOCAL CULTURAL NARRATIVES: EVIDENCE FROM JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOLS IN BELU

[PERSPEKTIF SISWA TERHADAP LINGKARAN MEMBACA DENGAN NARASI BUDAYA LOKAL: KAJIAN PADA SEKOLAH MENENGAH PERTAMA DI BELU]

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Abstract

This study investigates junior high school students' perceptions of reading circles using local cultural texts in Belu, Indonesia. Drawing on culturally responsive pedagogy and collaborative learning principles, the intervention involved 110 eighth-grade students who participated in a reading circle activity using translated Belu folk stories. After the activity, students completed a Likert-scale survey measuring enjoyment, cultural relevance, comprehension support, confidence, and motivation to continue reading. The results show consistently positive perceptions across all indicators. A total of 85% of students agreed or strongly agreed that reading circles were enjoyable, while 80% reported that the local stories felt culturally familiar and engaging. Similarly, 85% indicated that the cultural familiarity of the stories helped them understand the English text more easily. Increased confidence was also reported, with 80% of students feeling more capable of reading English texts after the activity. Although motivation to

read more English stories was slightly lower, 80% of students still expressed willingness to continue reading similar texts. While the findings are based on self-reported perceptions, the current study highlights that integrating reading circles with local narratives can strengthen students' motivation, comprehension, and confidence while affirming cultural identity. The approach is therefore recommended as an effective and culturally responsive strategy for EFL instruction in Indonesian junior secondary schools and other multilingual learning environments.

Keywords: EFL; local narratives; EFL; reading comprehension; reading circles

Abstrak

Studi ini menyelidiki persepsi siswa SMP terhadap penggunaan reading circles dengan teks budaya lokal di Belu, Indonesia. Berlandaskan pedagogi responsif budaya dan prinsip pembelajaran kolaboratif, intervensi ini melibatkan 110 siswa kelas VIII yang mengikuti kegiatan reading circle menggunakan cerita rakyat Belu yang telah diterjemahkan ke dalam bahasa Inggris. Setelah kegiatan, siswa mengisi kuesioner skala Likert yang mengukur aspek kesenangan membaca, relevansi budaya, dukungan pemahaman, kepercayaan diri, serta motivasi untuk terus membaca. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan persepsi positif secara konsisten pada seluruh indikator. Sebanyak 85% siswa menyatakan setuju atau sangat setuju bahwa kegiatan reading circle menyenangkan, sementara 80% merasa bahwa cerita lokal tersebut akrab secara budaya dan menarik. Selain itu, 85% siswa mengakui bahwa keakraban budaya membantu mereka memahami teks bahasa Inggris dengan lebih mudah. Peningkatan kepercayaan diri juga terlihat, dengan 80% siswa merasa lebih mampu membaca teks berbahasa Inggris setelah kegiatan. Meskipun motivasi untuk membaca lebih banyak cerita berbahasa Inggris sedikit lebih rendah, 80% siswa tetap menyatakan kesediaan untuk melanjutkan membaca teks serupa. Meskipun temuan ini didasarkan pada persepsi yang dilaporkan oleh siswa

sendiri, studi ini menegaskan bahwa mengintegrasikan reading circles dengan narasi lokal dapat meningkatkan motivasi, pemahaman, dan kepercayaan diri siswa sekaligus menguatkan identitas budaya. Pendekatan ini direkomendasikan sebagai strategi yang efektif dan responsif budaya dalam pengajaran EFL di SMP Indonesia serta konteks pembelajaran multilingual lainnya.

Kata Kunci: EFL; lingkaran membaca; narasi lokal; pemahaman membaca

Introduction

Developing effective reading comprehension strategies in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts has long been a challenge for teachers and curriculum designers in Indonesia, particularly at the junior high school (SMP) level. Although English has been introduced as a compulsory subject from primary school, many students still struggle with motivation, comprehension, and meaningful engagement with texts in English (Mubarok et al., 2022). This is particularly pronounced in rural and multicultural regions such as East Nusa Tenggara, where English instruction often faces challenges like limited exposure to English outside the classroom, insufficient materials relevant to local contexts, and deeply rooted cultural-linguistic identities that are not always reflected in school textbooks (Hornay, 2024).

Within this landscape, the reading circle or literature circle approach has emerged as a compelling pedagogical strategy to transform the reading experience into one that is interactive, engaging, and socially grounded. First developed by Daniels (2002), reading circles position students as active participants: each learner is assigned a role (e.g., summarizer, connector, vocabulary finder, discussion leader) and contributes collaboratively to the interpretation and discussion of a text. Reading circles are adapted classroom practices enabling group-based discussion on texts.

Reading circles have yielded promising results in various EFL contexts, including secondary schools in Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East (Chou, 2022; El-Esery, 2023; Fitri et al., 2018). Key findings across the literature highlight improvements in reading fluency,

vocabulary acquisition, student confidence, and critical engagement. Furthermore, scholars argue that reading circles encourage learner autonomy by empowering students to take responsibility for their own meaning-making and peer interactions (Noah, 2018; Djehatu et al., 2022). In Indonesia and other EFL contexts, reading circles have begun to gain traction as part of student-centered learning approaches (Fitri et al., 2018; Rokhayati & Alvionita, 2022). For example, Damayanti (2024) reported significant improvement in students' reading comprehension in senior high school after being taught through literature circles.

Despite their demonstrated potential, the implementation of reading circles remains under-explored in certain regions, including in Indonesian rural contexts where culturally relevant content might significantly improve learners' response and comprehension. Most reading circle studies have been carried out using generic English-language graded readers or Western literature, which may not always resonate particularly well with students from non-Western contexts. Several scholars, such as Mubarok et al. (2022) and Hornay (2024), have stated that EFL education in Indonesia must embrace culturally responsive practices, acknowledging students' identities and backgrounds as assets in learning rather than barriers. The cultural component cannot be underestimated. Research by Hornay (2024) and Mubarok et al. (2022) asserts that using culturally meaningful texts can deepen student engagement. When students read texts related to their cultural background, whether in language or familiar settings, they are better able to apply their relevant schema and make meaning more effectively (Habsy et al., 2023; Liang, 2014). Khonamri (2024) highlights the motivational impact of reading circles when infused with familiar cultural materials, while Kang et al. (2023) emphasize their usefulness even in EMI (English Medium Instruction) settings.

As articulated by Habsy et al. (2023), cognitive and constructivist perspectives on learning emphasize the role of prior knowledge in understanding new information. Thus, when students encounter texts that are culturally familiar reflecting their own local stories, characters, and values they may more readily comprehend and connect with the content. This is especially relevant in diverse cultural landscapes like that of East Nusa Tenggara, which is rich in oral traditions and folkloric

narratives yet often overlooked in formal school curriculum (Hornay, 2020).

Against this backdrop, the use of local Belu and Timorese folk tales in reading circles presents a compelling pedagogical innovation: it juxtaposes a collaborative reading model with culturally grounded content in English. For SMP students beginning their English reading journey, this may break down cognitive and affective barriers, enabling deeper engagement and understanding.

The present study seeks to explore students' perceptions of reading circles using translated local folk tales in a rural junior high school setting in Belu, Indonesia. It focuses on students' enjoyment, sense of cultural connection, perceived comprehension, and overall perceptions of the activity. This builds upon previous research (e.g., Espinosa-Cevallos et al., 2022; Kucuk, 2024; Liang, 2014), but pivots toward the unique contribution that culturally relevant texts can make to the literacy experience of young EFL learners in border or rural regions. Findings from this study contribute not only to ongoing conversations about learner-centered pedagogies but also about how localized and indigenized texts may serve as a bridge between language learning and cultural preservation in Southeast Asia.

Thus, the study aims to answer a central question: how do SMP students perceive the use of reading circles in their English reading lessons? This paper presents a survey-based investigation grounded in participant feedback, supported by relevant theories and prior studies. It advocates for greater emphasis on contextualized learning experiences that value the cultural knowledge learners already possess, reinforcing the idea that language and culture are inseparably intertwined in meaningful education (Hornay, 2024; Widodo, 2016).

Research Method

This study employed a descriptive survey-based design to explore junior high school students' perceptions of reading circles using local cultural texts translated into English. As recommended by Nichols and Edlund (2023), descriptive designs are well suited for exploratory studies in educational contexts where the aim is to generate data-driven insights

into participant attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs without manipulation of variables. The setting was four SMP located in Belu. The research was conducted during the 2024–2025 academic year as part of a classroom-based reading activity.

A total of 110 eighth-grade students (13–14 years old) participated in this research. All students had been learning English as part of the school curriculum since Grade 7 and displayed varied levels of reading proficiency. Most students came from Tetun linguistic backgrounds, with Indonesian also used frequently in daily communication.

The learning material consisted of two local folk tales: *Gunung Lakaan* and *Mane Ikon*. These texts, deeply rooted in the cultural heritage of Belu and Timor communities, were selected for their familiarity and integration of regional values. The researcher translated and simplified the stories into English, ensuring they remained grade-appropriate while maintaining essential cultural elements.

Students were divided into groups of five. Each group engaged in on-task reading circle activities designed to last for a 90-minute session. Prior to reading, the teacher introduced the purpose and structure of reading circles and demonstrated role expectations for: summarizer, connector (relating story elements to students' experiences), vocabulary finder, culture finder (identifying culturally significant aspects of the text), and discussion leader.

Each student selected or was assigned a role and read the text individually while making notes. Afterward, students discussed the story within their groups, each presenting their assigned perspective. The teacher rotated among circles, providing support where necessary, while encouraging peer-to-peer interaction.

At the end of the activity, a Likert-scale questionnaire (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree) was administered to capture students' perceptions of:

1. Their enjoyment of reading local stories in English.

2. Their sense of connection to the cultural content.
3. Their ability to understand stories better when culturally familiar.
4. Their enjoyment of the reading circle process itself.

Survey data were analyzed descriptively using percentage for each statement. Observational notes were also used to enrich interpretation of the survey results.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

The findings of the post-activity survey reveal that students responded positively to the use of reading circles combined with culturally familiar texts. The average scores across the four themes: enjoyment of reading circles, comprehension via cultural familiarity, engagement with local stories, and cultural identity and connection, ranged between 3.8 and 4.5 on a 5-point Likert scale. The following subsections present a detailed analysis of each theme, supported by visual representations and descriptive interpretations of the students' perceptions.

Positive affect toward culturally familiar stories

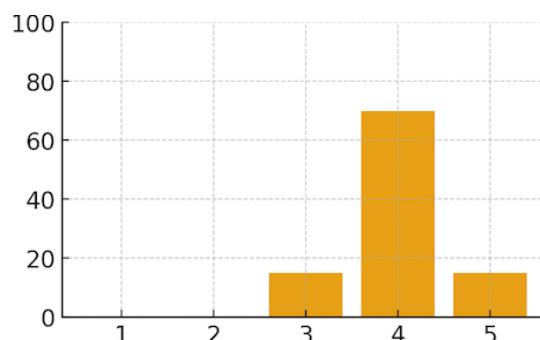


Figure 1 Students' Perception toward Culturally Familiar Stories

The first item reflects students' affective response to culturally familiar stories presented in English, with a dominant 70% selecting

"Agree" and 15% "Strongly Agree." This distribution indicates a clear positive emotional reaction toward reading folk narratives originating from their own cultural background. The high level of enjoyment suggests that familiarity with plot, character types, and moral values plays an important role in reducing reading anxiety and increasing willingness to engage with English texts. Rather than viewing reading as an academic burden, students perceived the task as pleasurable, supporting research showing that culturally grounded stories increase emotional engagement and lower affective barriers among EFL learners.

Perceived cultural relevance of the text

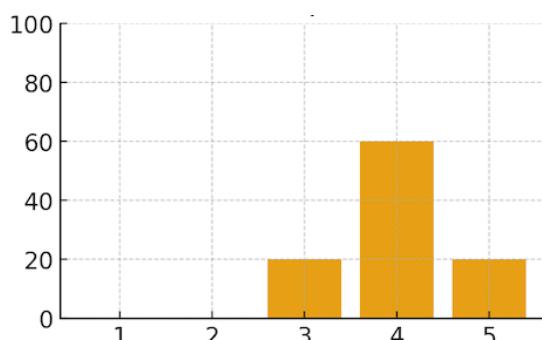


Figure 2 Students' Perception on Cultural Relevance of the Text

This chart indicates that students recognized strong cultural relevance in the stories used, with 80% responding positively and only 20% selecting neutral options. This suggests that learners perceived the narrative content as authentic, relatable, and reflective of their own social environment. Cultural relevance is a key element of culturally responsive pedagogy, and the students' responses confirm that reading English does not need to disconnect them from their heritage. Instead, the activity affirmed a sense of belonging, bridging linguistic learning with cultural identity and community knowledge.

Increased self-efficacy in reading English texts

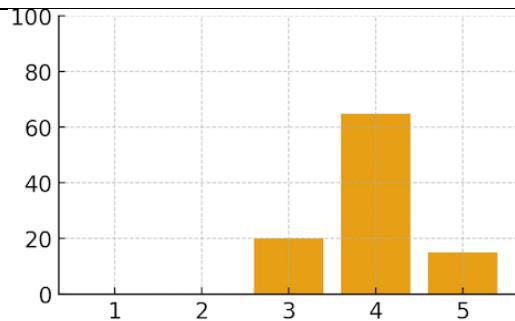


Figure 3 Students' Perception on their Confidence

This item demonstrates that most students felt more confident reading English texts after participating in the reading circle. The distribution of 65% Agree, 15% Strongly Agree, and 20% Neutral suggests that collaborative reading supported the development of reading self-efficacy. Group-based meaning negotiation, shared explanation, and the absence of public correction reduced feelings of inadequacy that often accompany foreign language reading. This result supports previous findings that literature circle environments provide emotional safety and promote willingness to take linguistic risks, contributing to greater long-term reading confidence.

Reading Motivation

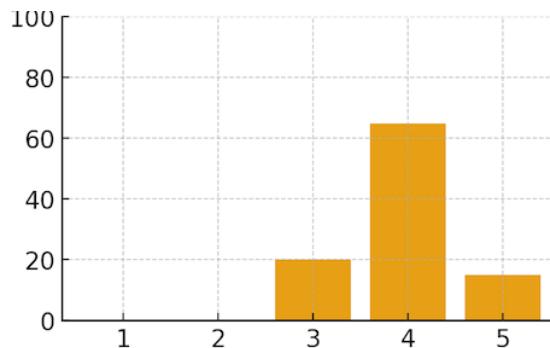


Figure 4 Students' Perception on their Reading Motivation

Students' desire to read more English texts after the activity yielded a moderately strong result, with 65% agreeing and 15% strongly agreeing. Although slightly lower than affective enjoyment scores, this finding still demonstrates a positive motivational shift. The results indicate that exposure to culturally relevant reading materials may serve as an entry point toward building sustained reading habits in English. However, the 20% neutral responses suggest that long-term motivation requires continued reinforcement. Motivation research frequently shows that repeated positive reading experiences are necessary before students internalize reading as a self-driven activity.

Enhanced comprehension through cultural background knowledge

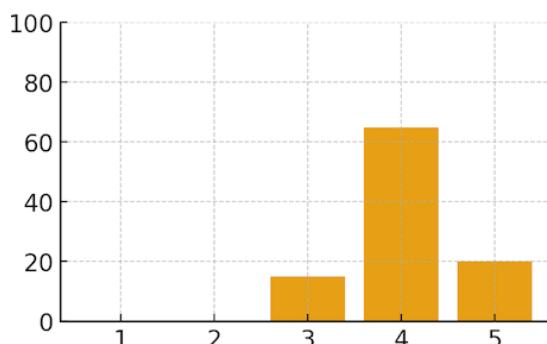


Figure 5 Students' Perception on Comprehension

The majority of students affirmed that they understood the English text better because it originated from their own culture, with 65% responding "Agree" and 20% "Strongly Agree." This supports the principle that cultural familiarity activates existing schema, making comprehension more efficient. When students already understand the narrative framework, they are able to focus attention on vocabulary and grammatical decoding rather than narrative interpretation. This finding strengthens the argument that culturally situated reading input can lighten cognitive load in EFL reading tasks, thereby improving comprehension regardless of students' proficiency level.

Positive perception of the reading circle format

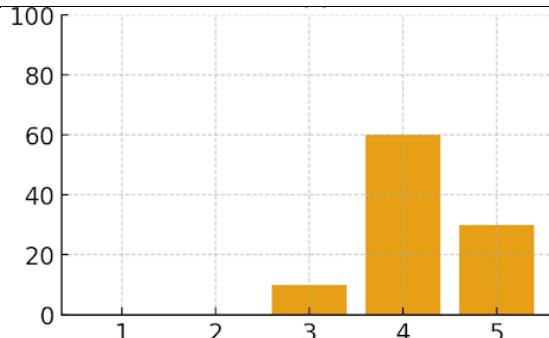


Figure 6. Students' Perception on Reading Circle Format

This item shows that 90% of students viewed the reading circle format positively, with 60% agreeing and 30% strongly agreeing that the activity was enjoyable. The response pattern confirms that students valued the collaborative structure and found it more engaging than teacher-centered reading instruction. The finding aligns with literature demonstrating that reading circles foster peer interaction, shared responsibility, and intrinsic engagement. For these SMP learners, enjoyment emerged not only from the story content itself but also from the opportunity to participate actively, discuss meaning with classmates, and assume assigned reading roles—elements that strengthen both motivation and literacy confidence.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the use of reading circles incorporating culturally familiar stories generated positive student perceptions across affective, cognitive, and motivational domains. All indicators demonstrated percentage score above the neutral midpoint, suggesting that the activity was well received by the SMP learners and made a meaningful contribution to their reading experience. The results align with a growing body of research affirming that literature circles constitute an effective pedagogical approach for fostering engagement and improving reading outcomes in EFL contexts (Noah, 2018; Chou, 2022; Widodo, 2016). However, the present study extends existing literature by demonstrating the combined influence of two mutually reinforcing elements: collaborative reading structures and culturally relevant narrative content.

The highest perception score across all indicators reflected students' affective responses to the activity, particularly their enjoyment of reading in a group and their pleasure in reading stories drawn from their own cultural heritage. This finding confirms earlier studies reporting that literature circles reduce the emotional burden often associated with reading in a foreign language by promoting collaboration, meaningful participation, and shared responsibility (Noah, 2018; Widodo, 2016). In this study, enjoyment was not only related to the group structure but was also tied to the cultural familiarity of the text. This reinforces Espinosa-Cevallos et al.'s (2022) argument that when reading materials are culturally grounded, students perceive reading as a personal experience rather than an academic task.

The positive emotional impact supports the principle that enjoyment can function as a precursor to literacy engagement, particularly among reluctant readers. As Khonamri (2024) notes, emotional responses to reading activities influence willingness to participate and persist in reading tasks. In this study, enjoyment appeared to be influenced by both the content (local folktales) and the format (reading circles), illustrating the value of aligning pedagogy and material selection when aiming to build affective engagement.

These survey findings were supported by classroom observations, which indicated that students were actively involved in group discussions, frequently referred to cultural elements within the stories, and demonstrated peer-supported meaning negotiation when encountering unfamiliar vocabulary or narrative details. Although observational data were not analyzed independently, they provided contextual support for interpreting students' positive perceptions.

Two survey indicators revealed strong agreement regarding the cultural closeness of the reading material and the role of cultural background knowledge in supporting comprehension. These findings support schema theory and constructivist perspectives, which propose that learners make meaning more effectively when they can connect new information with existing cultural knowledge (Habsy et al., 2023; Mubarok et al., 2022). When students read English stories with unfamiliar settings or culturally distant events, they must simultaneously negotiate

linguistic decoding and cultural interpretation. In contrast, culturally familiar stories reduce conceptual ambiguity, enabling students to devote more cognitive resources to language processing.

This finding resonates with Hornay's (2024) work on Indonesian learners' cultures of learning, which emphasizes that culturally grounded learning experiences contribute to student agency and confidence when engaging with foreign-language content. The present study supports this claim, showing that familiarity with narrative content increased not only comprehension but also cultural pride, as several students expressed appreciation for seeing regional stories validated in an academic English context. This directly addresses concerns raised in English language education research regarding the domination of Western-oriented texts and the marginalization of local knowledge in EFL classrooms (Hornay, 2020).

The use of translated local narratives may have played a key role in supporting comprehension by reducing both linguistic and cultural distance. While original English literary texts may offer greater exposure to authentic language use, they may also pose challenges for lower-proficiency learners. In this study, translated stories functioned as an instructional scaffold rather than a substitute for authentic literature, enabling students to engage meaningfully with English while drawing on familiar narrative knowledge.

Although translation may not fully capture the stylistic richness of original English literary works, the primary instructional aim of this intervention was not literary analysis but engagement, comprehension support, and confidence-building among junior secondary EFL learners. From this perspective, translated local texts served as a developmentally appropriate entry point to English reading, potentially preparing students for more linguistically complex and stylistically rich texts in subsequent stages of instruction.

An important outcome of the reading circle activity was the development of reading confidence, demonstrated by students' agreement that they felt more capable of reading English texts afterward. This result is consistent with literature showing that literature circles promote self-efficacy by encouraging peer-supported meaning making

rather than teacher-fronted correction (Chou, 2022; El-Esery, 2023). When students discuss vocabulary, infer meaning collectively, and explain ideas to peers, they experience successful comprehension events that contribute to linguistic confidence.

This is an important finding given that low self-efficacy is frequently cited as a barrier to literacy development for Indonesian learners (Djehatu et al., 2022). Whereas traditional comprehension exercises may reinforce student passivity, literature circles reposition learners as active collaborators, thereby improving confidence even among those with limited reading proficiency. Kucuk (2024) similarly reports that students participating in reading circles demonstrated higher self-belief in their reading ability compared to those engaged in traditional reading tasks.

Although motivation scores were slightly lower than other indicators, they remained positive, suggesting that the intervention had a promising motivational effect. Motivation is often one of the most difficult components to shift in short classroom interventions, particularly among students with limited exposure to authentic English texts. The moderate strength of this result aligns with findings from Damayanti (2024), who reported that while literature circles improved comprehension rapidly, long-term motivation required repeated implementation over multiple reading cycles. Nevertheless, the fact that most students expressed willingness to read more English stories after the activity indicates that culturally grounded reading circles may serve as a meaningful entry point for developing future reading habits.

Khonamri (2024) argues that reading circles promote intrinsic motivation by creating environments in which students feel responsible for contributing to group meaning. In the present study, motivation appears closely linked to the interpersonal dimension of reading. This is consistent with widely accepted motivational models that emphasize the social and identity-based dimensions of L2 reading rather than viewing motivation as an exclusively individual psychological construct.

The findings correspond strongly with previous work demonstrating that literature circles improve comprehension,

engagement, and participation across various learning levels (Fitri et al., 2018; Raden & Palembang, 2017; Liang, 2014). However, most studies have focused on either the structural benefits of cooperative reading or the role of story content in supporting literacy development. Few studies have explicitly examined the intersection between reading circles and culturally responsive reading inputs. The present study contributes to this literature by showing that cultural familiarity and collaborative reading structures reinforce one another; neither element alone fully accounts for the totality of students' positive responses.

Furthermore, the findings support claims that reading circles benefit a wide range of learners, including vocational students (Widodo, 2016), pre-service teachers (Schoonmaker, 2014), and even university-level EMI learners (Kang et al., 2023). The present study demonstrates that similar benefits apply to junior secondary learners in a provincial Indonesian setting.

It is important to note that the findings reflect students' perceived experiences of enjoyment, comprehension support, and confidence rather than directly observed reading behaviour or tested comprehension outcomes. While self-reported perceptions cannot conclusively demonstrate that these experiences occurred in an objective sense, they remain meaningful indicators of affective engagement and learner response, particularly in classroom-based exploratory research focusing on motivation and participation.

As with all survey-based research, there is a possibility that students' perceptions may not fully correspond to their actual reading performance. However, in the context of EFL reading instruction, learners' subjective experiences are pedagogically significant, as feelings of enjoyment, confidence, and cultural connection often precede sustained engagement and willingness to read in a foreign language.

These results offer several implications for EFL reading instruction. First, literature circles may be adopted as a low-cost and pedagogically flexible method for encouraging active readership in contexts where teacher-led instruction dominates. Second, the integration of culturally familiar content provides an effective scaffold for

comprehension and a sense of identity affirmation, strengthening calls for more culturally sustaining reading materials in Indonesian schools. Finally, the strong affective responses observed here highlight the importance of prioritizing emotional engagement as a legitimate instructional goal rather than as a secondary benefit.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite the positive findings reported in this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the data were collected mainly through a self-report questionnaire. The results therefore reflect students' perceptions of enjoyment, comprehension support, and confidence, rather than direct evidence of their actual reading behaviour or reading achievement. It is possible that some students' responses were influenced by positive feelings toward a new learning activity or a desire to give favourable answers.

Second, although classroom observations were conducted to support the interpretation of the survey results, these observations were not analysed as a separate data set. Future studies may use more systematic observation methods, interviews, or think-aloud activities to better understand how students engage with texts during reading circles and how their perceptions relate to actual reading practices.

Third, this study used translated local folk tales rather than original English texts. While the translated stories helped reduce linguistic and cultural difficulty for junior high school learners, the results may differ if authentic English literary texts are used. Future research could compare reading circles using translated local stories and original English texts to examine their different effects on comprehension, motivation, and engagement.

Finally, the reading circle activity was conducted in a short time frame. Although students showed positive responses, longer-term studies are needed to explore whether reading circles can lead to sustained motivation, improved reading skills, and long-term reading habits in English.

Conclusion

This study examined junior high school students' perceptions of reading circles using culturally familiar narratives translated into English in a rural EFL context in Belu, Indonesia. The findings indicate that students responded positively to the activity, particularly in terms of enjoyment, cultural connection, perceived support for comprehension, and reading confidence. The combination of collaborative reading practices and local cultural content appeared to reduce linguistic and affective barriers, enabling students to engage more comfortably with English texts while drawing on their existing cultural knowledge. Although the study relied on self-reported perceptions and was conducted over a short time frame, the results suggest that culturally responsive reading circles can serve as an effective entry point for engaging young EFL learners in reading activities. It is therefore recommended that English teachers consider integrating reading circles with culturally relevant texts into their reading instruction, especially in contexts where students have limited exposure to English. Future research may extend this work by examining long-term effects, comparing translated and original English texts, and combining perception data with behavioral and performance-based measures.

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