

Contextualizing ELT Materials through Local Folklore: A Case Study in a Multilingual Eastern Indonesian Classroom

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ABSTRACT

In multilingual regions of Eastern Indonesia, English Language Teaching (ELT) materials that lack cultural relevance often fail to engage learners or reflect their linguistic realities. Local folklore offers a culturally grounded source for contextualizing ELT materials to enhance student learning and motivation. This study explores how local folklore can be integrated into ELT materials and investigates students' multilingual practices and perceptions within a folklore-based classroom. A qualitative case study was conducted with one English teacher and thirty-two students in a multilingual secondary school. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis, and analyzed thematically. Findings show that folklore-based ELT materials enhance engagement, support comprehension through culturally familiar narratives, and promote active participation. Students naturally employed translanguaging strategies to negotiate meaning and strengthen English learning. The integration of folklore also reinforced cultural identity and pride among learners. Overall, contextualizing ELT materials through local folklore proved highly effective in multilingual classrooms, fostering inclusivity, meaningful learning, and cultural awareness. These results highlight the importance of incorporating local narratives into ELT curricula to promote culturally sustaining pedagogy in linguistically diverse settings.

Keywords: Contextualized ELT Materials; Local Folklore; Multilingual Classroom; Eastern Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

The integration of culturally grounded content into English Language Teaching (ELT) has gained increasing scholarly attention in the past decade, particularly in multilingual and multicultural contexts. Researchers have long observed that English teaching practices dominated by Western-centric materials often fail to reflect learners' sociocultural realities or respond to their local communicative needs (Mahboob, 2018; Banegas, 2020). In contrast, culturally relevant pedagogy highlights that when instructional materials are connected to learners' lived experiences and community knowledge, students exhibit greater engagement, stronger identity investment, and improved comprehension (McKinley & Rose, 2020; Xu, 2022). This is particularly significant in Indonesia, where linguistic diversity and cultural plurality shape everyday life and learning. The country is home to more than 700 languages and countless regional traditions, each reflecting unique ways of perceiving and expressing meaning. Consequently, adopting contextualized ELT materials that recognize and incorporate local culture is not only pedagogically sound but also socially necessary.

Traditional ELT materials in Indonesia often rely on foreign cultural settings, characters, and communicative situations that are far removed from learners' daily realities. Such materials risk alienating students by promoting cultural models they cannot easily relate to (Rahayu & Setiyadi, 2020). When learners encounter content that feels distant or irrelevant, their motivation and comprehension often decline. Conversely, research shows that contextualizing English instruction with locally meaningful content fosters higher learner participation, stronger retention, and more authentic communication (Tomlinson, 2016; Tambunan, 2023). Contextualization enables students to link new linguistic input to familiar cultural frameworks, creating meaningful connections between language and life.

In this regard, local folklore—comprising myths, legends, and oral tales passed down through generations—offers an ideal resource for developing contextualized ELT materials. Folklore not only preserves community wisdom and moral values but also represents a living form of cultural identity that remains close to learners' everyday experiences. Within the Indonesian educational landscape, integrating folklore into ELT provides both linguistic and cultural benefits. Linguistically, folklore features repetitive structures, accessible vocabulary, and clear narrative sequences that can scaffold comprehension for learners at various proficiency levels (Silitonga et al., 2021; Dewi & Astuti, 2020). Culturally, these stories evoke familiarity and emotional resonance, promoting a sense of belonging and pride while reducing anxiety toward foreign language learning (Rahayu & Setiyadi, 2020).

The incorporation of local folklore aligns with the principles of culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) proposed by Paris and Alim (2017), which advocates for teaching approaches that not only respect but actively sustain students' linguistic and cultural identities. CSP moves beyond merely “including culture” in lessons—it demands

that schools become spaces where learners' heritage knowledge is valued as an intellectual resource. In multilingual contexts, this perspective challenges the monolingual bias of traditional ELT and encourages the creation of materials that validate linguistic and cultural diversity. By integrating folklore into English teaching, educators can uphold this principle, ensuring that local stories—once confined to oral tradition—gain renewed significance in modern classrooms.

Another theoretical lens relevant to this discussion is translanguaging, which describes how multilingual learners fluidly use all their linguistic resources to make meaning (García & Wei, 2018; Cenoz & Gorter, 2022). In multilingual classrooms like those in Eastern Indonesia, translanguaging occurs naturally as students switch between local languages, Indonesian, and English to negotiate understanding. Rather than viewing this as interference, translanguaging recognizes it as a productive learning strategy that enhances comprehension and supports cognitive development. When folklore is introduced into such classrooms, students often engage in translanguaging to interpret familiar stories through a new linguistic medium. For example, learners may retell a well-known legend in English while discussing details in their local language. This interplay between languages enriches the learning experience, strengthens conceptual understanding, and bridges cultural knowledge with new vocabulary and structures.

Eastern Indonesia offers a particularly rich context for exploring these dynamics. The region is characterized by extraordinary linguistic diversity, with communities often speaking multiple local languages in addition to Bahasa Indonesia. Oral storytelling remains central to cultural life, functioning as a vehicle for moral education, social bonding, and the preservation of ancestral wisdom (Sawaki, 2020; Rumabar, 2021). Yet despite these vibrant oral traditions, classroom instruction frequently relies on standardized textbooks designed for urban or monolingual audiences. As a result, students may find English learning disconnected from their lived experiences. Integrating local folklore into ELT represents an opportunity to bridge this gap—making English learning not only accessible but also culturally affirming.

Several recent studies have illustrated the potential of this approach. Asi and Fauzi (2023) found that an illustrated English e-book based on regional folktales significantly improved students' comprehension of narrative texts. Similarly, Gusmalinda and Asnawi (2023) reported that a reading textbook embedded with local folktales enhanced students' reading motivation and performance compared to standard materials. Beyond Indonesia, research from the Philippines (Villanueva & Santos, 2024) and Malaysia (Abdul Rahman & Chan, 2023) has shown that culturally embedded narratives foster bilingual negotiation of meaning, cultural empathy, and sustained engagement. These studies collectively demonstrate that when learners encounter culturally familiar stories in English, they engage not only with the language but also with their identities as cultural beings.

However, while the benefits of folklore-based ELT materials are widely acknowledged, empirical research on how they function in multilingual classroom practice remains limited. Few studies have examined how teachers adapt local stories for English instruction, how students interact with these materials linguistically, or how multilingual communication unfolds in such settings. Moreover, there is a lack of attention to how folklore-based lessons affect learners' affective responses—such as motivation, confidence, and cultural pride. Addressing these gaps is essential for understanding how culturally grounded materials can be systematically integrated into language education.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the process and outcomes of contextualizing ELT materials through local folklore in a multilingual secondary school in Eastern Indonesia. Specifically, it investigates (1) how teachers adapt folklore into English materials; (2) how students engage linguistically and culturally with these materials; and (3) how the integration of folklore influences learners' motivation, comprehension, and identity. Using a qualitative case study design, this research captures the authentic dynamics of classroom interaction, offering nuanced insights into how folklore-based ELT supports both language learning and cultural affirmation.

By situating ELT within the sociolinguistic and cultural realities of Eastern Indonesia, this study contributes to ongoing discussions about equity, inclusivity, and contextualization in language education. It argues that incorporating local folklore is not merely an aesthetic choice, but a pedagogical imperative that validates learners' cultural identities and promotes meaningful engagement. Ultimately, this research seeks to demonstrate that contextualized, folklore-based ELT can transform English classrooms into spaces of cultural sustainability—where language learning becomes a bridge between global communication and local heritage.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Contextualized ELT Materials

Contextualized ELT materials refer to instructional resources designed to align language learning with learners' cultural backgrounds, lived experiences, and local sociolinguistic realities. Over the last decade, researchers have increasingly emphasized the importance of contextualization in ELT as a response to critiques of decontextualized, Western-centric textbooks that overlook learners' cultural identities and communicative needs (Mahboob, 2018; Banegas, 2020). Contemporary materials development theory argues that ELT resources must activate learners' prior knowledge, reflect meaningful real-world contexts, and promote engagement through culturally resonant themes (Tomlinson, 2016). This emphasis on relevance and authenticity is grounded in cognitive theories of learning, which suggest that when new linguistic input is connected to familiar

cultural schemata, learners demonstrate improved comprehension, increased retention, and higher motivation.

Recent scholarship frames contextualized materials as an essential component of culturally responsive and culturally sustaining pedagogy. Xu (2022) notes that designing materials that reflect learners' sociocultural environments supports identity negotiation and empowers students to see their local knowledge as academically valuable. Similarly, Paris and Alim's (2017) culturally sustaining pedagogy underscores that instructional materials should preserve and promote local cultural practices rather than marginalizing them. As such, contextualized ELT materials not only teach language but also acknowledge learners as cultural beings whose histories and traditions influence how they interpret meaning. This pedagogical orientation becomes particularly significant in multilingual settings, where learners navigate multiple languages and cultural identities simultaneously.

In the Indonesian context, the need for contextualized ELT materials is heightened by the country's linguistic and cultural diversity. Studies in the past decade show that contextualizing ELT through local content—such as regional history, daily life practices, and indigenous narratives—supports learner engagement and strengthens cultural awareness (Rahayu & Setiyadi, 2020; Silitonga et al., 2021). In particular, incorporating folklore into materials aligns with the principles of contextualized learning because folklore offers culturally embedded narrative structures familiar to students. Such narratives provide authentic settings for vocabulary development, reading comprehension, and critical thinking while simultaneously reinforcing learners' cultural identity (Tambunan, 2023). Moreover, contextualized materials in multilingual classrooms have been found to facilitate translanguaging practices, allowing learners to draw on their entire linguistic repertoires to construct meaning (García & Wei, 2018; Cenoz & Gorter, 2022).

Local Folklore

Local folklore represents a rich reservoir of cultural knowledge, communal values, and narrative traditions that can serve as powerful pedagogical resources in English Language Teaching (ELT). In contemporary educational discourse, folklore is understood not merely as entertainment or traditional storytelling, but as a culturally embedded form of knowledge that reflects a community's worldview, moral systems, and linguistic identities (Rahayu & Setiyadi, 2020). Within Indonesian contexts particularly in Eastern Indonesia folklore encompasses myths, legends, fables, origin stories, and oral traditions that have been passed down across generations. These narratives embody symbolic meanings and cultural metaphors that resonate deeply with learners, positioning folklore as an accessible and meaningful bridge between students' lived experiences and the content of ELT classrooms.

Over the past decade, research has increasingly emphasized the pedagogical potential of folklore in language education. Studies demonstrate that integrating folklore into ELT materials enhances learners' engagement, cultural awareness, and

narrative competence by providing familiar contexts that scaffold comprehension (Silitonga et al., 2021; Dewi & Astuti, 2020). Folklore offers naturally structured storylines, repetitive linguistic patterns, and culturally meaningful themes that facilitate vocabulary development, reading comprehension, pronunciation practice, and creative writing. Because learners already possess cultural and emotional connections to these stories, folklore-based tasks create meaningful learning experiences that promote deeper cognitive processing and sustained motivation.

The use of folklore in ELT aligns closely with the principles of culturally sustaining pedagogy, which advocate for educational practices that maintain, value, and revitalize local cultural identities (Paris & Alim, 2017). By incorporating folklore into classroom materials, educators not only enrich language instruction but also affirm students' cultural heritage as a legitimate and valuable epistemic resource. This is particularly significant in multilingual regions of Eastern Indonesia, where local languages and cultural identities are at risk of marginalization due to dominant national and global education pressures. Folklore thus becomes a medium through which linguistic and cultural diversity is preserved within formal education systems.

Furthermore, local folklore supports multilingual pedagogical approaches by enabling learners to draw on their full linguistic repertoires during meaning-making. Translanguaging studies show that when learners engage with culturally familiar stories, they naturally employ multiple languages to negotiate understanding, connect ideas, and express interpretations (García & Wei, 2018; Cenoz & Gorter, 2022). In this way, folklore not only reinforces linguistic diversity but also enhances English learning by integrating students' home languages as cognitive and cultural resources.

Multilingual Eastern Indonesian Classroom

The multilingual classroom in Eastern Indonesia represents one of the most linguistically diverse educational environments in the Southeast Asian region. Students in this context typically navigate multiple local languages—often belonging to Papuan, Austronesian, or Timorese language families—alongside Indonesian as the national language and English as a foreign language. This complex linguistic ecology shapes not only students' communicative practices but also their cognitive, cultural, and educational experiences. Recent scholarship in multilingual education argues that such environments require pedagogical approaches that acknowledge learners' full linguistic repertoires rather than adhering to monolingual language teaching models (García & Wei, 2018; Cenoz & Gorter, 2022). In Eastern Indonesian classrooms, multilingualism is the norm rather than the exception, influencing classroom interactions, peer communication, identity formation, and language learning strategies.

The dynamics of these multilingual classrooms are best understood through translanguaging theory, which conceptualizes multilingual learners as fluid

language users who draw on diverse linguistic resources to construct meaning and participate in learning activities. Studies in the past decade highlight that translanguaging occurs naturally in Eastern Indonesian communities, where students frequently switch between local vernaculars, Indonesian, and English depending on context, audience, and communicative needs (Sawaki, 2020; Rumabar, 2021). Such practices challenge traditional ELT frameworks that restrict learners to English-only environments, suggesting instead that learners benefit from being able to strategically mobilize all their languages. In this view, multilingualism is not perceived as a barrier but as an asset that enhances comprehension, fosters confidence, and promotes deeper engagement with learning materials.

The sociocultural richness of Eastern Indonesian classrooms also influences how students interpret and interact with ELT materials. Because learners often bring diverse cultural backgrounds and oral storytelling traditions into the classroom, pedagogical materials that resonate with these cultural assets such as local folklore are more likely to support meaning-making and engagement (Silitonga et al., 2021). Research indicates that when learning content connects to students' cultural identities, multilingual learners are more inclined to participate actively, relate prior knowledge to new information, and use their home languages as cognitive scaffolding (Dewi & Astuti, 2020). This is particularly relevant in regions where oral traditions remain central to community life, making culturally familiar narratives a natural tool for facilitating English learning.

Moreover, multilingual Eastern Indonesian classrooms present unique challenges and opportunities for teachers. Teachers must navigate issues such as language dominance hierarchies, differences in students' proficiency across languages, and the tension between standardized national curricula and the linguistic realities of their classrooms. However, teachers who adopt multilingual and culturally responsive pedagogies have been shown to create more inclusive learning environments, using strategies such as translanguaging, culturally relevant materials, and collaborative storytelling to support learners (Kambuaya, 2019; Ernas, 2022). These approaches allow multilingual learners to leverage their linguistic strengths and cultural backgrounds, ultimately enhancing participation and reducing classroom inequities.

In summary, the multilingual Eastern Indonesian classroom is a dynamic sociolinguistic space characterized by linguistic diversity, cultural richness, and fluid language practices. Understanding these dynamics is essential for designing contextualized ELT materials especially those incorporating local folklore that respond to learners' needs and harness the full potential of multilingual pedagogies. Such an understanding provides the foundation for implementing culturally sustaining and linguistically inclusive ELT practices in the region.

METHOD

Design and Samples

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore how English Language Teaching (ELT) materials are contextualized through local folklore within a multilingual classroom in Eastern Indonesia. A qualitative case study was chosen because it allows for an in-depth, contextually grounded examination of complex social and pedagogical phenomena within their natural settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach is particularly relevant for understanding how teachers adapt instructional materials, how students interact with culturally embedded content, and how multilingual classroom dynamics shape learning processes. By focusing on a single bounded system one classroom in Eastern Indonesia the study sought to capture the nuanced and situated nature of culturally informed ELT practices.

The study was conducted in a lower secondary school located in Eastern Indonesia, an area characterized by dense linguistic diversity and strong oral storytelling traditions. Participants included one English teacher and thirty-two students who spoke multiple local languages in addition to Indonesian. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who were directly involved in the use of folklore-based ELT materials, ensuring that data reflected authentic experiences and perspectives (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Instrument and Procedure

Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Classroom observations focused on instructional activities, language use, and interactions surrounding folklore-based materials. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with both the teacher and selected students to gain insights into their interpretations, experiences, and perceptions of the contextualized materials. Additionally, ELT materials adapted from local folklore were collected and analyzed to understand the design principles guiding their development. Multiple data sources enabled triangulation, enhancing the credibility and depth of the findings (Denzin, 2017).

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2019) recommended stages: familiarization, initial coding, theme generation, reviewing, defining, and reporting. Codes were derived inductively from the data to capture recurring patterns related to material adaptation, cultural integration, and multilingual practices. The analysis focused on how folklore narratives were incorporated into lesson activities, how students made meaning through their linguistic resources, and how the teacher mediated cultural content in the ELT process. NVivo software was used to support data organization and coding.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, several validation strategies were employed. Triangulation of data sources was conducted by comparing observations, interview data, and document analysis to corroborate emerging themes and reduce researcher bias. Member checking was carried out by sharing preliminary interpretations with the teacher and several students, allowing them to confirm accuracy or clarify misunderstandings. Peer debriefing was performed through discussions with two fellow researchers familiar with qualitative inquiry, enabling critical reflection on coding decisions, theme refinement, and potential analytical blind spots. These combined strategies strengthened the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the study's findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal three major themes regarding the use of local folklore to contextualize ELT materials in a multilingual Eastern Indonesian classroom.

Strategic Integration of Local Folklore into ELT Activities

The teacher integrated local folklore into reading and speaking activities by adapting traditional narratives into simplified English texts while retaining culturally significant elements such as characters, moral lessons, and familiar geographic settings. Observational data showed that students responded enthusiastically during retelling activities. For example, during a storytelling task based on a well-known local legend, several students smiled, nodded, and volunteered to speak without prompting. One observation note recorded:

"When the teacher read the English version of the folklore, many students whispered the local version to each other, showing recognition. More hands went up when asked to retell the story compared to previous lessons using textbook passages."

A student interview further confirmed the impact of familiarity:

"Miss, this story I already know since I was small, so I'm not afraid to speak. Even if my English is not perfect, I know the meaning." (Student 7)

These examples illustrate how cultural familiarity lowered students' affective barriers and increased their willingness to participate.

Emergence of Multilingual Practices as Cognitive Scaffolding

Translanguaging occurred naturally as students worked with folklore-based materials. Students frequently used local languages and Indonesian to negotiate meaning before producing responses in English. The following excerpt from an observation transcript demonstrates this process:

Student A (in local language): "This part means he tricked the villagers, right?"

Student B (Indonesian): "Iya, terus kita bilang 'he deceived the villagers' itu bahasa Inggrisnya."

Both students then wrote an English summary together.

Interview data also highlighted how students consciously used multilingual resources to support understanding:

"Sometimes the English words are difficult, but if we talk first in our language, we can understand faster before answering in English." (Student 12)

The teacher reported intentionally allowing multilingual interaction:

"If they use only English, many will stay quiet. But when they discuss in their own languages first, they become more confident to try the English version."

These examples show how multilingual practices acted as cognitive scaffolding that enhanced comprehension and participation.

Increased Cultural Pride and Identity Relevance

Students expressed that using local folklore increased their sense of cultural pride and made English learning feel more meaningful. Many emphasized that familiar stories reduced anxiety. One student explained:

"If the text is from outside Indonesia, sometimes I don't understand the culture. But folklore from here makes English feel closer to me."
(Student 3)

Another commented:

"I feel happy because our stories are used in English class. It makes me remember my grandparents' stories." (Student 19)

Observation notes also recorded heightened engagement during culturally embedded discussions:

"During group work, students animatedly shared memories of hearing the story from elders, intertwining these memories with explaining the English vocabulary."

These affective responses illustrate how culturally relevant materials fostered belonging, motivation, and identity affirmation.

The findings underscore the pedagogical value of contextualizing ELT materials through local folklore, aligning with recent scholarship emphasizing culturally responsive and sustaining approaches to language teaching (Paris & Alim, 2017; Xu, 2022). The teacher's adaptation of folklore into ELT materials reflects Tomlinson's (2016) argument that effective learning materials must be meaningful, engaging, and connected to learners' real-life experiences. In this case, folklore provided culturally authentic narratives that activated learners' prior knowledge and facilitated meaningful language use.

The emergence of translanguaging practices in the classroom supports theories by García and Wei (2018), who argue that multilingual learners benefit from mobilizing their full linguistic repertoires. Students' use of multiple languages for sense-making demonstrates that multilingualism is not an obstacle but a resource that enhances comprehension and participation. This finding is particularly relevant in Eastern Indonesia, where linguistic diversity is deeply embedded in everyday communication. Allowing translanguaging validated students' linguistic identities and supported more equitable learning conditions.

Furthermore, the affective impact of local folklore such as increased motivation and cultural pride aligns with previous studies showing that culturally embedded materials strengthen students' identity investment and engagement (Rahayu & Setiyadi, 2020; Silitonga et al., 2021). By seeing their cultural knowledge reflected in ELT materials, students developed a stronger sense of belonging in the English classroom, which in turn supported their willingness to speak, interact, and take risks in learning. This highlights the importance of materials that affirm rather than marginalize learners' cultural backgrounds. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that contextualized ELT materials incorporating folklore are particularly effective in multilingual classrooms, where cultural relevance and linguistic diversity play central roles in shaping students' engagement and learning outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that contextualizing ELT materials through local folklore is a powerful pedagogical approach for multilingual Eastern Indonesian classrooms. The integration of folklore not only supported linguistic development but also enhanced learner engagement, cultural identity affirmation, and meaningful interaction. Through the use of culturally familiar narratives, students were able to draw on their existing cultural knowledge and multilingual repertoires to support English learning. The findings demonstrate that culturally grounded materials foster deeper comprehension, encourage active participation, and promote positive attitudes toward language learning. The study highlights the need for ELT practitioners in multilingual contexts to adopt culturally sustaining pedagogies that recognize and value students' linguistic and cultural resources. Teachers should be encouraged to incorporate local narratives, traditions, and community knowledge into ELT materials to create more inclusive and effective learning environments. Future research may explore how folklore-based ELT materials can be expanded into other skill areas—such as writing, listening, and multimodal communication—or examine long-term impacts on learners' proficiency and cultural awareness. The main contribution of this study lies in demonstrating how folklore-based contextualization can operationalize culturally sustaining pedagogy in real classroom practice, offering a concrete model for designing ELT materials that align with learners' cultural and linguistic realities. Overall, this study reinforces that contextualized teaching practices rooted in local culture hold significant

potential for improving ELT outcomes in linguistically diverse regions such as Eastern Indonesia.

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