Can Beliefs and Realities Be Bridged? A Study of Culturally Responsive English Literacy Education in Rural Papua

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Abstract

English literacy education in rural Papua, Indonesia, presents unique challenges shaped by geographical isolation, ethnolinguistic diversity, and limited resources. While previous studies have examined EFL teaching challenges in Indonesia, little research has explored how teachers' pedagogical beliefs interact with contextual constraints in rural settings. This study investigates the nexus between English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' beliefs and classroom practices in resource-constrained environments. Employing a qualitative case study approach, data were collected from X teachers through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Findings reveal a persistent gap between teachers' pedagogical beliefs and their ability to implement them due to contextual constraints, including inadequate teaching materials and a rigid national curriculum. Teachers who incorporated local cultural elements, such as Papuan folktales and proverbs, into their lessons demonstrated higher student engagement and improved literacy outcomes. These culturally responsive practices bridge students' linguistic realities and the English literacy curriculum, fostering a deeper connection to the learning process. However, systemic barriers, including insufficient professional development and the absence of culturally relevant teaching materials, limit the broader adoption of these practices. This study underscores the need for flexible curricula that integrate local cultural content and calls for increased institutional support to equip teachers in rural areas. Addressing these challenges is crucial for improving English literacy education in rural, multilingual contexts, ensuring equitable learning opportunities for all students.

Keywords: students, language, behavior, thinking, intensity, intercultural, communication

INTRODUCTION

Located in the easternmost region of Indonesia, Papua is known for its extraordinary cultural diversity, encompassing numerous Indigenous ethnic groups, local languages, and deeply rooted traditions. However, despite its abundant natural resources and rich heritage, the region struggles with longstanding educational and infrastructure challenges. A UNICEF-supported baseline study found that illiteracy rates in rural and remote parts of Papua Province can reach 49%, compared to 5% in urban areas. In certain highland districts,

the rate climbs to 92%. Additionally, nearly 50% of children over five in rural areas have never attended school, whereas in urban centers, the figure is only 5% (Statistics Indonesia et al., 2013; Myriad Research et al., 2016). A key issue contributing to these disparities is that many teachers in Papua have limited knowledge of practical pedagogical approaches and culturally responsive resources suited to the diverse learning needs of students (Dabamona et al., 2021). While many educators recognize the importance of incorporating local cultures and values into their teaching to make learning more meaningful and effective, they often lack clear strategies for implementing such practices (Allen et al., 2017; Dabamona et al., 2021). This challenge is further exacerbated by current preservice and in-service teacher education programs, which do not always equip educators with the necessary skills to teach in culturally diverse and resource-constrained environments. Additionally, teacher absenteeism, caused by illness, unreliable transportation, adverse weather conditions, cultural obligations, and limited professional development (Mensah et al., 2023), further disrupts classroom learning. As a result, the daily realities in remote and under-resourced schools often diverge from policy frameworks that assume stable attendance, abundant resources, and strong institutional support (Febriana et al., 2018; Burgess & Lowe, 2022).

Papua's cultural richness—comprising hundreds of local languages and many folklore genres such as myths, legends, riddles, and oral poems—offers invaluable assets for improving literacy (Hermino., 2016). In this setting, culturally responsive pedagogy emerges as a powerful way to bridge official curricula and the everyday realities of local classrooms (Munro, 2018). Essentially, by integrating community traditions, languages, and experiences into lesson plans, educators can make school content more relevant and meaningful, enhancing learners' engagement and self-esteem (Samuels, 2018; Morcom, 2017). This approach validates students' cultural backgrounds, encourages family collaborative input, and ultimately improves academic performance (Pevec-Zimmer et al., 2024). Students develop a stronger sense of identity when they feel seen and affirmed. They are more likely to persist in their studies (Derakhshan et al., 2022), suggesting that culturally responsive practices respect Papua's heritage and empower communities toward long-term educational gains.

At the same time, national educational agendas in Indonesia emphasize English literacy as a critical skill for economic competitiveness and academic advancement, placing pressure on local schools and teachers to implement standardized English curricula (Muhalim, 2022; Gayatri et al., 2023). The tension between national policy requirements and local realities underscores the need to explore teaching methods that effectively integrate cultural sensitivity. Within this context, culturally responsive education emerges as a potential bridge between national English proficiency mandates and rural Papua's socio-cultural complexities. Connecting the academic content with students' cultural backgrounds, knowledge systems, and lived experiences can enhance engagement and improve achievement (Kirkpatrick, 2011; Anyichie & Butler, 2023). For rural Papuan learners, aligning English literacy instruction with local narratives, oral traditions, and community-based values could foster greater relevance and motivation.

Several studies have investigated the multifaceted nature of English teaching in Papua, focusing on teacher competence, emotional factors, pre-service training challenges, and instructional strategies within the local context. For instance, Rinantanti et al. (2017) explored self-perceived competence among 159 senior high school EFL teachers, finding that

the vast majority considered themselves competent or very competent in subject knowledge and pedagogical skills. Nonetheless, Suhirman and Rinantanti's (2019) research in the Merauke District revealed gaps in teachers' understanding of classroom-based assessment principles, particularly among those in remote areas with limited professional development access. This discrepancy underscores the influence of contextual factors—such as geographic isolation and resource constraints—on teachers' ability to implement curricular requirements fully. Meanwhile, Ohorella (2019) examined barriers encountered by pre-service teachers, highlighting the tension between the pedagogical concepts learned in training programs and real-world classroom practice. In addition to competence and training, emotional and linguistic dimensions significantly affect teaching and learning in rural Papua. Rejeki et al. (2018) delved into the emotional geographies of a male EFL teacher in Asmat, illustrating how cultural contexts, geographic challenges, and the relational aspects of teaching shape both teachers' and students' experiences. Emotional engagement emerged as a critical component in navigating obstacles such as limited infrastructure and diverse community expectations. Further expanding on instructional strategies, Sahib et al. (2020) investigated translanguaging practices in West Papuan classrooms, finding that teachers viewed the strategic use of local languages alongside English to enhance comprehension and foster a supportive environment for language acquisition. This approach also helped respect students' linguistic identities while making complex material more accessible.

While some research has explored teacher competence, emotional factors, and linguistic strategies in Papua, few studies closely examine how teachers' pedagogical beliefs intersect with systemic constraints and day-to-day classroom realities, especially in culturally diverse settings. This gap leaves questions about how educators translate personal convictions into instruction when faced with limited resources, standardized curricula, and complex local traditions. To address this issue, the present study focuses on the interplay among teacher beliefs, systemic pressures, and culturally responsive pedagogy in Papua, investigating how local cultural elements are woven into lesson design and delivery. Highlighting challenges and adaptations that shape real-world classrooms, the research aims to enhance context-specific understanding of how beliefs become practice—ultimately informing policy and professional development efforts.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to explore how teachers' beliefs shape their classroom practices in teaching English literacy in Merauke, Papua. The case study design was chosen for its capacity to provide an in-depth, contextually grounded understanding of complex dynamics within a specific cultural and geographical milieu (Yin, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2016). Merauke, located in southern Papua, was selected due to its significant socio-cultural and linguistic diversity and geographical isolation (Yembise, 2011). These factors make Merauke an ideal setting for examining how teachers navigate the challenges of teaching English literacy in a resource-constrained environment.

Furthermore, the study recruited four English teachers from two junior high schools in Merauke, each overseeing 30 seventh-grade students. Employing purposeful sampling to select participants with specific expertise, experiences, or characteristics that align with the study's objective (Patton, 2015), these participants were selected to reflect a range of teaching experiences and instructional styles, thereby providing a richer understanding of

how beliefs materialize in classroom practice. They were assigned pseudonyms using teacher codes (T1, T2, T3, T4) to maintain confidentiality. T1, who has been teaching for over a decade, concentrates on enhancing literacy despite resource constraints, indicating substantial experience adapting to limited materials. T2, with six years of teaching, centers instruction on local cultural elements, reflecting an interest in making learning more contextually relevant. T3, in her third year of teaching, focuses on engaging students struggling with English, suggesting a targeted approach to differentiated instruction. Finally, T4, having taught for eight years, promotes student-centered learning, illustrating a shift toward more active, learner-driven classrooms. Together, these profiles reveal diverse pedagogical priorities and levels of experience, offering a multifaceted view of teaching practices.

Three data collection methods captured the relationship between teachers' beliefs and classroom practices. First, classroom observations provided real-time evidence of how teachers enacted their stated beliefs in actual instructional scenarios. Each teacher was observed during three lessons (lasting 45–60 minutes each), focusing on teacher-student interactions, instructional strategies, and integrating cultural elements. A systematic observation protocol ensured consistency across all sessions, with detailed field notes recorded for further analysis (Lim, 2024). Second, semi-structured interviews offered profound insights into teachers' beliefs, motivations, and challenges. Conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, each interview lasted 60–90 minutes, covering topics like perceptions of English literacy, the use of local cultural elements, and barriers faced in implementing these practices. Additionally, group interviews were held with eight students per class to understand their views (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Finally, document analysis involved reviewing lesson plans, teaching materials, and student assignments to assess the alignment between teachers' expressed beliefs and their instructional artifacts. This method provided insights into how elements were incorporated into instructional practices by examining written, visual, or digital materials such as lesson plans, policy documents, student work, textbooks, reports, and institutional records. (Bowen, 2009).

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-step framework. This began with familiarization, involving repeated reviews of transcripts, observation notes, and documents to understand the material comprehensively. Next, initial codes were developed to capture recurring ideas (Miles et al., 2020), which were subsequently grouped into broader themes related to teachers' beliefs and practices. Each theme was defined and named to encapsulate its core insights, culminating in a final synthesis that produced a cohesive narrative (Miles et al., 2020). Interviews were manually coded to uncover themes on teachers' beliefs, student engagement, and instructional challenges. Meanwhile, observation data helped assess the consistency between teachers' beliefs and their day-to-day classroom practices. Finally, the document analysis was conducted by reviewing and coding lesson plans and teaching materials to identify patterns in cultural integration within instructional design. Key themes, such as local narratives, Indigenous knowledge, and community-based learning, were analyzed for alignment with classroom observations and teacher interviews.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The EFL teachers in rural Merauke believed that English literacy is essential for students' future opportunities and should be integrated with local culture to enhance relevance and engagement. They valued connecting English lessons to students' cultural backgrounds to improve comprehension and foster a more meaningful learning experience. Additionally, the teachers preferred interactive, group-based learning to encourage active participation and collaboration among students. Their instructional philosophy was rooted in student-centered approaches, emphasizing interactive methods to make English literacy instruction more engaging and effective.

Table 1. Teachers' observed practices and challenges

Teacher	Observed Practices	Challenges
T1	a) Frequently uses Papuan folktales (e.g., The Bird of Paradise and the Crocodile, The Legend of King Mimika) to teach grammar and narrative structure; students are highly engaged. b) Integrates Papuan proverbs (e.g., "Do not jump from one boat to another in the middle of the river." c) Encourages storytelling and role-playing activities to enhance comprehension.	a) Limited access to printed teaching materials, requiring self-created worksheets and handwritten resources. b) Some students struggled to translate cultural stories into English, requiring additional scaffolding.
T2	a) Students actively participate by using local proverbs (e.g., "Wisdom of the Ancestors") to explain abstract vocabulary concepts.	a) Limited availability of flexible, culturally relevant teaching materials.
T3	a) Uses Papuan proverbs (e.g., "Every tree in the forest has its role") to teach sentence structure and meaning. b) Students analyze the grammatical components of proverbs and create their own in English. c) Encourages group work where students translate Indigenous proverbs while maintaining grammatical accuracy.	a) Limited teaching aids prevent the use of additional visual or interactive materials. b) Rigid curriculum requirements leave little flexibility for integrating more culturally diverse texts. c) Time constraints limit deeper engagement with student-created content.
T4	a) Incorporates Papuan proverbs (e.g., "Do not jump from one boat to another in the middle of the river") to teach vocabulary in context. b) Students discuss proverbs in their native language and then identify English synonyms, antonyms, and contextual meanings. c) Pairs of students create short dialogues or scenarios demonstrating the lesson's vocabulary in use.	a) Lack of culturally relevant materials makes it challenging to find suitable teaching texts. b) No access to alternative teaching resources, requiring heavy reliance on spoken discussions and teacher-generated activities. c) Textbook-driven instruction limits opportunities for expansion beyond the lesson objectives.

In one observed lesson, T1 utilized the folktale *The Bird of Paradise and the Crocodile* to teach past tense verbs and cause-and-effect relationships in English. The lesson began with T1 narrating the story in simple English, using gestures and expressive intonation to help students follow the plot. Periodically, T1 paused to ask prediction questions, prompting students to anticipate what might happen next. After storytelling, T1 wrote several sentences from the folktale on the board, such as *"The crocodile swam across the river."* and *"The Bird of Paradise helped the crocodile because he was stuck."* Students were then instructed to identify past tense verbs (*swam, helped, was*) and discuss how these words indicate actions that had already happened. To reinforce understanding, T1 asked students to rewrite key events in the present tense before converting them into the past tense, allowing them to compare the grammatical structures. Finally, to deepen engagement, students participated in a role-playing activity, acting out scenes while narrating the events using past tense verbs. This interactive approach helped students internalize grammar concepts within a culturally familiar context, making the lesson more meaningful and accessible.

In another lesson, T2 incorporated local proverbs to introduce abstract vocabulary concepts and expand students' English word bank. The lesson began with T2 writing the proverb *"Wisdom of the Ancestors"* on the board and asking students to discuss its meaning in their native language before attempting to express it in English. This initial discussion allowed students to connect prior knowledge to new language concepts, fostering deeper comprehension. T2 then introduced related vocabulary words such as *wisdom, legacy, tradition,* and *inheritance*, explaining their meanings with real-life examples. Students were divided into small groups to reinforce learning and asked to create short dialogues or stories using the newly learned vocabulary. Some students related the proverb to family traditions, while others used it to describe the knowledge passed down in their communities. By grounding vocabulary instruction in a culturally relevant context, T2 ensured that students memorized new words and understood their deeper meanings, making English learning more engaging and personally significant.

Furthermore, T3 used Papuan proverbs such as *"Every tree in the forest has its role"* to teach sentence structure and meaning in English. In one lesson, students were asked to analyze the grammatical components of the proverb by identifying the subject, verb, and object before applying the same pattern to create their proverbs in English. Additionally, T3 encouraged group work where students translated Indigenous proverbs into English, ensuring grammatical accuracy while maintaining their original meanings. However, limited teaching aids and rigid curriculum requirements restricted teachers' ability to incorporate more culturally diverse texts, limiting deeper engagement with student-generated content.

Similarly, T4 applied Papuan proverbs to teach vocabulary in context, helping students relate new words to familiar expressions. For example, *"Do not jump from one boat to another in the middle of the river"* was used to illustrate the concept of commitment and its related vocabulary, such as *decision, hesitation, and consequence.* Students first discussed the proverb's meaning in their native language. Then, they identified English synonyms and antonyms for keywords before working in pairs to create short dialogues or scenarios that demonstrated their meaning. However, T4 faced significant challenges, including a lack of culturally relevant teaching materials and an overreliance on textbook-driven instruction, which limited opportunities for expansion beyond the lesson objectives.

The lack of resources emerged as a significant barrier for all teachers, mainly due to their reliance on rigid, government-issued textbooks that lacked local cultural content, limiting opportunities for meaningful student engagement (Albari & Yamin, 2020). These standardized materials, designed for a national audience, often failed to reflect Papua's cultural and linguistic diversity, creating a disconnect between the curriculum and students' lived experiences. This finding aligns with Hamied (2012) and Mariyono (2024), who critique the inadequacy of one-size-fits-all curricula in multilingual and multicultural contexts. Moreover, Shan and Aziz (2022) argue that the absence of culturally relevant materials alienates students and reduces their learning motivation. In contrast, T1 demonstrated agency by adapting standardized materials to incorporate Papuan folktales and proverbs, making lessons more accessible and engaging. This approach reflects the principles of culturally responsive pedagogy, as emphasized by Gay (2018), who asserts that teaching rooted in students' cultural backgrounds enhances both engagement and academic achievement.

The rigidity of standardized curricula further limited teachers' ability to align their instructional practices with their pedagogical beliefs. T3 and T4 expressed frustration with the inflexible structure of government-issued textbooks, which provided little room for contextual adaptation. This rigidity reflects systemic challenges in rural education, where curriculum design prioritizes uniformity over relevance to diverse local contexts (Hamied, 2012; Zein et al., 2020). In contrast, T1 demonstrated creativity in modifying these materials to incorporate students' cultural and linguistic realities, exemplifying the role of teacher agency in overcoming structural barriers (Zeichner, 2019; Brown et al., 2021). These efforts align with Widodo's (2016) findings, emphasizing the transformative potential of culturally embedded materials in bridging the gap between standardized curricula and students' lived experiences.

The lack of professional development opportunities further exacerbated the challenges that T2, T3, and T4 faced, particularly in their efforts to implement culturally responsive pedagogy and curriculum adaptation. All three teachers strongly needed structured training programs that would provide practical strategies for integrating local cultural content into English instruction. However, lacking targeted professional development left them without adequate support and resources, making it challenging to innovate under rigid curricula and limited teaching materials. As a result, they often relied on textbook-driven methods despite recognizing the potential benefits of more interactive and culturally relevant approaches. This finding aligns with research by Zein (2017), Kirkpatrick (2011), and Ventista & Brown (2023), who emphasize the critical role of professional development in equipping teachers with context-specific pedagogical skills. Without continuous training and mentorship, rural teachers struggle to adapt their practices to meet their students' linguistic and cultural needs (Glover et al., 2016; Soekamto et al., 2022). Studies have shown that collaborative workshops, peer-learning programs, and mentorship initiatives effectively support teachers in implementing culturally responsive and context-sensitive teaching (Germuth, 2018; Alhanachi et al., 2020; Nganga & Kambutu, 2024). Investing in such professional development opportunities would help teachers like T2, T3, and T4 bridge the gap between their pedagogical beliefs and classroom realities, ultimately leading to more engaging and meaningful English instruction for students in rural Papua.

This study examines the relationship between teacher beliefs, systemic constraints, and instructional practices in rural Papua, particularly within the framework of culturally responsive pedagogy. However, its small sample size, limited to four teachers, restricts the findings' generalizability to the region's broader teaching population. Additionally, the study focuses on teacher perspectives without exploring student experiences or how they respond to culturally integrated teaching methods. Incorporating student viewpoints in future research would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact on learning engagement and outcomes. Lastly, although this study emphasizes culturally responsive pedagogy, it does not investigate other innovative approaches that may be effective in low-resource environments. Future studies could examine the role of technology integration, peer-assisted learning, or bilingual education models in improving English literacy in rural Papua. Expanding research in these areas could provide practical strategies for enhancing English instruction in similar resource-constrained settings.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight the complex relationship between teacher beliefs, classroom practices, and systemic constraints in English literacy instruction in rural Merauke. While teachers recognized the importance of English literacy and its role in students' futures, their ability to implement effective instructional practices varied. Teachers who integrate culturally relevant content, such as Papuan folktales and proverbs, engage students more effectively, bridging the gap between curriculum expectations and local realities and demonstrating the impact of culturally responsive pedagogy. However, systemic barriers, including limited resources, rigid curricula, and a lack of instructional flexibility, restricted other teachers from adopting interactive and student-centered approaches. These challenges highlight the need for institutional reforms, including more adaptable curricula, improved resource distribution, and targeted professional development. Addressing these structural limitations would enable teachers to align their practices with their pedagogical ideals, ultimately fostering more inclusive and effective English literacy instruction in underserved rural settings.

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