

Integrating Papuan Local Cultural Content in English Narrative Reading Instruction: Strategies, Challenges, and Frameworks for Oral Tradition in EFL Contexts

***¹Vina Vania Suhartawan, ¹Nunung Suryati, ¹Ahmad Heki Sujiatmoko**

¹Universitas Negeri Malang, Indonesia

***Correspondence:**

vina.vania.2302218@students.um.ac.id

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Abstract

English language teaching in Papua faces distinctive challenges due to its multilingual environment, geographical isolation, and reliance on undocumented oral traditions, yet limited research has examined how these realities shape culturally responsive pedagogy in EFL contexts. This study aimed to explore how English teachers at junior high, senior high, and university levels in Jayapura integrate Papuan local cultural content into narrative reading instruction, and to identify challenges in implementing such instruction when source materials are largely oral and undocumented. Guided by culturally responsive pedagogy and using a narrative inquiry design, three purposefully selected teachers participated in in-depth interviews, classroom observations, document analysis, and maintained reflective journals over three months. Data were analyzed thematically with cross-case comparison. Findings revealed six interrelated strategies, contextual substitution, community engagement, project-based cultural documentation, trilingual and bilingual vocabulary methods, and student-centered cultural knowledge exchange, through which teachers enhanced reading comprehension, cultural relevance, and student engagement. These strategies, however, were constrained by six persistent challenges: scarcity of documented materials, high individual material development burden, time constraints, cultural sensitivity and protocol requirements, curriculum rigidity, and professional isolation. The study offers an empirically grounded framework for integrating indigenous oral traditions into English reading instruction and highlights the need for institutional support, collaborative networks, and curriculum flexibility to preserve oral cultural heritage while strengthening students' linguistic and cultural identities.

Keywords: Local content, cultural integration, English language teaching, Papua Indonesia, teaching strategies.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, culturally responsive pedagogy has gained recognition as a critical approach to enhancing English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning outcome, particularly in linguistically and culturally diverse contexts (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2021; Karpava, 2024). Integrating learners' cultural backgrounds into instructional content not only fosters engagement and motivation but also strengthens their identity and sense of belonging in the

classroom (Gay, 2018; Nieto, 2017). Narrative reading instruction, in particular, holds substantial potential for such integration, as stories function as powerful media through which language, culture, and values are transmitted (Bui & Fagan, 2013; Tavakoli et al., 2012; Porto, 2013; Azizah et al., 2021). However, much of the EFL curriculum worldwide remains oriented toward standardized materials, often derived from Western contexts, that may not reflect students' lived experiences or cultural heritage (Mishan, 2021; Munandar & Newton, 2021; Babaii, 2022). This misalignment, as emphasized by Gashi (2021) and Amerian and Tajabadi (2020), can result in reduced relevance, diminished student interest, and lower comprehension, as learners are required to process unfamiliar cultural references alongside new language forms. In many parts of the Global South, including Indonesia, this disconnect underscores the need for pedagogical models that embed culturally relevant narratives into language learning while maintaining academic rigor and language acquisition goals (Madkur et al., 2024; Sukarno & Riyadini, 2024; Azhary & Fatimah, 2024).

This call for culturally grounded pedagogies is particularly relevant in regions where linguistic diversity and indigenous knowledge systems remain central to community life. In Indonesia, such contexts are most vividly exemplified in the province of Papua, which presents distinctive educational challenges and opportunities. The province of Papua represents one of the nation's most complex educational landscapes, shaped by exceptional ethnolinguistic diversity, geographical isolation, and rich indigenous cultural traditions (Munro, 2018; Harsono et al., 2024; Parker & Sudibyo, 2022). For many communities, oral traditions—such as folktales, myths, and origin stories—are central to cultural identity but remain undocumented, existing only within the memories of elders and community leaders (Yektiningtyas-Modouw & Karna, 2013; Yektiningtyas & Gultom, 2018). In narrative reading classes, teachers must navigate the tension between prescribed national or international curricula and the imperative to reflect local cultural realities (Alharbi, 2024; Ratri et al., 2024). Consequently, integrating Papuan oral traditions into EFL reading instruction requires teachers to assume multiple roles—as cultural mediators, material developers, and curriculum innovators—while also managing the pedagogical demands of language teaching. This context presents both an urgent need and a valuable opportunity to design approaches that preserve indigenous narratives while enhancing students' linguistic and cognitive development.

Furthermore, narrative texts hold particular significance in English language teaching (ELT) as they provide rich contexts for both cultural transmission and language acquisition (Grecu, 2024; Khoir et al., 2024). Encompassing stories, legends, folktales, and personal accounts, they reflect the values, worldviews, and social practices of specific communities (Mishra & Satpathy, 2020; Yumnarn, 2023) and serve the dual function of developing language proficiency while transmitting cultural knowledge through authentic linguistic input embedded in familiar frameworks. Their use aligns with Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP), which emphasizes academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2018), positioning narrative materials as tools to validate cultural identities, promote pride, and maintain academic rigor while supporting the decolonization of ELT (Kumaravadivelu, 2012; Pennycook, 2017; Phillipson, 2013). Effective narrative reading instruction draws on strategies such as prediction, visualization, linking ideas, questioning, clarification, summarization, and evaluation (Cho et al., 2018), along with methods such as Choral Reading, Paired Reading, PORPE, and KWL (Lee & Szczerbinski,

2021; Midi et al., 2024; Oktavia & Sueb, 2024; Sari et al., 2023). Beginning learners often rely on translation and dictionary use, while advanced learners benefit from context-based inference and background knowledge activation. Integrating local cultural content into these strategies not only counters native-speaker dominance but also affirms learners' cultural heritage (Pennycook, 2017; Phillipson, 2013). Empirical evidence shows that such approaches enhance motivation, improve skills across all language domains, and strengthen cultural identity (Herdi et al., 2023; Tineh et al., 2023; Papp & Cottrell, 2021), underscoring their pedagogical value in fostering linguistic competence, learner engagement, and identity formation.

Research in the EFL context highlights the importance of integrating local culture into English language teaching as a means of making learning more relevant, fostering cultural identity, and increasing student engagement. Azhary and Fatimah (2024) found that pre-service teachers incorporated cultural elements across product, practice, and perspective dimensions, creating materials that reflected learners' lived experiences. Azizah et al. (2021) developed descriptive reading materials based on local culture that were shown to be highly valid, practical, and effective in improving comprehension. Yektingtyas and Gultom (2018) demonstrated how folktales could be adapted as instructional media to help children learn and preserve endangered local languages, addressing both linguistic and socio-cultural challenges. At the curriculum level, Ratri et al. (2024) designed an English syllabus for young learners that embedded local culture to enhance comprehension and maintain identity, though the limited availability of such materials posed difficulties for teachers. In classroom practice, Herdi et al. (2023) identified eight strategies—from contextualizing topics to creating video projects—that effectively integrated local culture into English lessons, while Munandar and Newton (2021) showed how teachers exercised agency to address interculturality and adapt pedagogy despite policy constraints.

While previous research has explored the integration of local culture into English language teaching through documented resources, established literary works, or general culturally responsive frameworks, little attention has been paid to contexts where cultural content exists predominantly in oral form and remains undocumented. In many Papuan communities, oral traditions such as folktales, myths, and origin stories are central to cultural identity yet lack formal written records, creating distinctive pedagogical challenges for English narrative reading instruction. Existing studies do not sufficiently address how teachers navigate the complexities of sourcing, adapting, and integrating such materials within multilingual, resource-limited, and geographically remote educational settings. This study addresses this gap by focusing on the practical strategies teachers use to incorporate undocumented oral traditions into narrative reading instruction across different educational levels in Papua, and by examining the challenges they face in doing so. The aim is to generate practical insights and frameworks that support the integration of oral traditions in ways that preserve indigenous knowledge while fostering students' language development.

METHOD

This study employed a narrative inquiry design as outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018), a qualitative approach that collects and interprets detailed accounts of lived experiences to understand how individuals construct meaning within their professional and sociocultural contexts (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). The method was selected for its suitability in examining how teachers develop and implement instructional strategies while

navigating context-specific challenges. Applied to this research, narrative inquiry enabled an in-depth exploration of English teachers' experiences integrating local cultural content into narrative reading instruction within Papua's highly diverse educational landscape, where undocumented oral traditions present distinctive pedagogical considerations.

The study focused on English teachers across different educational levels in Papua who had demonstrated experience in integrating local cultural content into their teaching practices. This population was selected because they represented experienced educators working in a distinctive cultural context where oral traditions and undocumented cultural materials present specific pedagogical challenges. Three participants were selected purposefully using criterion sampling, which enables the identification of individuals who meet predefined, study-relevant attributes (Robinson, 2023). Selection criteria included a minimum of five years' English teaching experience, at least three years of teaching in Papua, appropriate educational qualifications, and documented experience in cultural content integration. Participant 1, a junior high school teacher in the Skouw border area, had six years of teaching experience; Participant 2, a senior high school teacher in Jayapura with a Master's degree in Applied Linguistics, had 28 years of experience; and Participant 3, a university lecturer in Jayapura with expertise in Papuan folklore, had 37 years of experience. To ensure confidentiality, systematic pseudonyms were assigned and specific institutional names were replaced with generic descriptors while retaining sufficient contextual information to preserve research clarity (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data collection took place over a three-month period from March to May 2025, employing multiple methods to ensure a comprehensive understanding of both strategies and challenges in integrating local cultural content. In-depth narrative interviews served as the primary method, with each participant completing three sessions: background and strategy development (20–30 minutes), specific implementation experiences (20–30 minutes), and challenges with corresponding adaptation strategies (20–30 minutes). The interview protocol was designed to elicit rich, detailed accounts of pedagogical practices and concrete examples of obstacles encountered (Seidman, 2019). To complement the interviews, classroom observations were conducted for each participant to capture strategies in practice and document implementation challenges in situ. Each observation spanned one complete class period (80–90 minutes) and employed structured field notes focusing on cultural integration methods, strategy effectiveness, student engagement, and emergent challenges (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). Document analysis of lesson plans, teaching materials, and assessment tools provided further insight into how strategies were systematically planned and operationalized. Additionally, participants maintained reflective journals for six weeks, recording daily experiences with strategy implementation, challenges faced, and adaptive solutions—an approach that supports triangulation and deepens the narrative inquiry's interpretive validity (Patton, 2015).

Data analysis employed a systematic qualitative approach aimed at identifying both strategies and challenges, using procedures aligned with thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data from interviews, classroom observations, document analysis, and reflective journals were coded and categorized to capture patterns of practice and recurring implementation issues. Strategy identification involved coding all segments in which participants described specific methods, techniques, or approaches for integrating local cultural content, followed by categorization according to educational level and instructional

context to reveal systematic patterns. Similarly, challenge analysis entailed coding all reported and observed obstacles, which were then classified by type and severity to clarify the range and impact of implementation barriers. A cross-case analysis compared strategies and challenges across different educational levels, enabling the identification of shared practices, distinctive approaches, and context-specific constraints (Miles, et al., 2019). Throughout the process, the constant comparative method was applied to refine categories, ensure internal consistency, and deepen understanding of both successful strategies and persistent challenges (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Credibility was enhanced through member checking, whereby participants reviewed the preliminary findings to confirm the accuracy, clarity, and completeness of the interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Data collected from teacher interviews, classroom observations, document analysis, and reflective journals revealed a range of strategies and notable challenges in integrating Papuan local cultural content into English language teaching. The findings are organized to address both research questions, detailing the instructional strategies teachers employed and the specific challenges they faced during implementation.

Table 1. Teacher strategies for integrating Papuan local cultural content

Theme	Representative Evidence
Contextual Substitution Strategy	P1: "Making them read traditional stories about their own food culture... sandwich is not their food... so the learning was not very effective." (I/S/CSS/P1-4/25)
	P2: "Narrative texts about the origin of Lake Sentani... descriptive texts about MacArthur Monument..." (I/S/CSS/P2-3/25)
	P3: "Provided folktales from various regions of Papua as reading materials." (I/S/CSS/P3-5/25)
Community Engagement and Partnership	P1: "I rely... on natives... even my students can also be a source... ask local students or teachers who are native to that village." (I/S/CEP/P1-4/25)
	P2: "We once took students to Asei Village... listened to elders telling traditional tales..." (I/S/CEP/P2-3/25)
	P3: "I always go to villages... interview them... bring informants to class..." (I/S/CEP/P3-5/25)
Project-Based Cultural Documentation	P2: "Students always work together... understanding and applying local cultural values contextually..." (I/S/PBCD/P2-3/25)
	P3: "Produced detailed reading comprehension reports... published Folk tale Anthology." (I/S/PBCD/P3-5/25)
Trilingual Teaching Methodology	P1: "From English, I translate it to Skouw... then to Indonesian... relate them to similar tales in Skouw first." (I/S/TTM/P1-4/25)
Flashcard Method with Local Languages	P1: "On one card I provide English and on the other local language... Students remember English words better when they connect directly to Skouw language." (I/S/FMLL/P1-4/25)

Student-Centered Cultural Knowledge Exchange	P2: "Ask them to share stories from their respective cultures... they connect their personal experiences with the narratives." (I/S/SCKE/P2-3/25)
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The findings reveal that teachers employ a set of interconnected strategies that collectively bridge English reading instruction with the sociocultural realities of their learners (Gay, 2018; Nieto, 2017; Sun & Zhang, 2021). One of the most prominent is the careful substitution of culturally irrelevant textbook examples with locally meaningful references, a practice that prevents emotional disconnection and allows students to engage with content that mirrors their own lives (Amerian & Tajabadi, 2020; Paris & Alim, 2017). This is evident when narratives about foreign foods, such as sandwiches, are replaced with stories about papeda, or when descriptions of distant landmarks give way to accounts of Lake Sentani, the MacArthur Monument, or other familiar sites. Such substitutions do more than localize content; they validate students' identities and increase the likelihood that comprehension and engagement occur simultaneously (Bui & Fagan, 2013; Mishra & Satpathy, 2020; Porto, 2013).

This attention to cultural relevance extends beyond text adaptation into the active involvement of the community. Teachers draw on traditional leaders, cultural practitioners, and local residents as knowledge partners, inviting them into classrooms or taking students to cultural sites where oral traditions are preserved (Battiste, 2019; Gay, 2018; Nieto, 2017). In contexts where much knowledge is transmitted orally and tied to specific places, such collaboration not only enhances the authenticity of reading materials but also reinforces respect for indigenous ways of knowing (Hossain, 2023; García & Wei, 2014). When students hear stories directly from elders and then work with these narratives in class, the reading process becomes an extension of lived cultural practice rather than a detached academic exercise (Battiste, 2019; Porto, 2013). The integration of local culture is further strengthened through project-based documentation activities that require sustained engagement and produce tangible outcomes such as folktale anthologies and detailed reading analysis reports (Azhary & Fatimah, 2024; Bui & Fagan, 2013). These collaborative projects reflect the inherently communal nature of knowledge transmission and are anchored by the guidance of community elders to ensure cultural accuracy (Prastiwi, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2021; Mishra & Satpathy, 2020).

Language serves as both the medium and the bridge in this process, with teachers deliberately drawing on students' multilingual repertoires—English, indigenous languages such as Skouw, and Indonesian—to facilitate comprehension and strengthen cross-linguistic cognitive links (García & Wei, 2014; Zein, 2018). In some cases, this takes the form of structured trilingual sequencing, where stories are introduced in the local language, discussed in Indonesian, and revisited in English; in others, teachers employ direct English–local language flashcard pairings that bypass Indonesian to enhance vocabulary retention and reduce cognitive interference (Ahmad et al., 2023). These approaches not only aid comprehension but also affirm the legitimacy of indigenous languages as tools for academic success, aligning with culturally sustaining pedagogy principles (Paris & Alim, 2017; Riley et al., 2024). Equally significant is the positioning of students as cultural contributors. In classrooms where multiple tribal backgrounds intersect, learners share stories from their own traditions, drawing parallels with the texts under study and expanding collective cultural knowledge (Mustofa & Hill, 2018; Nieto, 2017). This reciprocal exchange transforms the classroom into a living archive of cultural diversity, where reading becomes

simultaneously an act of language acquisition and mutual cultural discovery ([Abacioglu et al., 2023](#); [Mishra & Satpathy, 2020](#); [Porto, 2013](#)).

Table 2. Challenges in integrating Papuan local culture into English reading instruction

Theme	Representative Evidence
Documentation Scarcity	<p>P1: "We have this (Papua) culture but it has not been poured into written form. It's still oral." (I/C/DC/P1-4/25)</p> <p>P2: "Not all Papuans can be informants because... the source of stories must come from respected elders or traditional leaders... Many informants have died, so the successors don't really understand the information or stories... correctly." (I/C/DC/P2-3/25)</p> <p>P3: "It's not easy to find informants... there are not many books about this (Papua) culture." (I/C/DC/P3-5/25)</p>
Material Development Burden	<p>P1: "Like it or not, we (as teachers) have to prepare it... search for materials again... even though they are the ones who have this culture." (I/C/MDB/P1-4/25)</p> <p>P2: "We have to be very careful... sometimes there are students... who say that the stories we teach are different versions from what their grandmothers told them." (I/C/MDB/P2-3/25)</p> <p>P3: "I have to interview community elders... transcribe their stories, adapt the language... and develop all the accompanying materials... completely independently." (I/C/MDB/P3-5/25)</p>
Time Constraints	<p>P1: "...it requires more time for preparation and we... become lazy... and feel like there's no support." (I/C/TC/P1-4/25)</p> <p>P2: "It's not easy... unless there's plenty of time." (I/C/TC/P2-3/25)</p> <p>P3: "They have to find informants, conduct good interviews... then write them in good and correct English." (I/C/TC/P3-5/25)</p>
Cultural Sensitivity and Protocol Navigation	<p>P2: "I always avoid things related to politics, power, and religion... some stories... are sacred or considered to violate customs." (I/C/CSPN/P2-3/25)</p> <p>P3: "...I prefer to use something general, not related to their myths. Fables and legends are more neutral to use." (I/C/CSPN/P3-5/25)</p>
Curriculum Rigidity	<p>"...materials... were from textbooks distributed by the Ministry... rural or remote regions were not given policies to adapt the curriculum." (I/C/CR/P2-3/25)</p> <p>"...what I did was much opposed because learning English should use an international curriculum..." (I/C/CR/P3-5/25)</p>
Professional Isolation	<p>P1: "...my colleagues disagreed... they preferred to take materials from international sources. But... they finally opened their eyes to cultural heritage as a material option." (I/C/PI/P3-5/25)</p>

The findings reveal that teachers in Papua face intersecting challenges when integrating local culture into English reading instruction, with documentation scarcity

emerging as a fundamental barrier. Difficulties in locating qualified cultural informants, coupled with the absence of published resources, compel educators to dedicate substantial time to cultural investigation rather than pedagogical preparation. This scarcity reflects broader tensions between orally transmitted traditions and the written formats required in formal schooling (Mora & Coyle, 2023; Porto, 2013; Yektingtyas & Gultom, 2018). Participants emphasized that many narratives remain confined to oral form and can only be conveyed by authorized elders, yet the decline in the number of such knowledge holders has created both cultural and educational vulnerabilities where traditional stories risk being lost or distorted (Yumnam, 2023; Ratri et al., 2024). In the absence of institutional mechanisms for preservation, teachers assume the dual role of cultural documenters and curriculum developers, translating community-held narratives into pedagogically viable materials while safeguarding their authenticity. This process—often involving field interviews, transcription of oral accounts, linguistic adaptation, and the creation of supplementary teaching aids—demands not only considerable time and effort but also acute cultural sensitivity and instructional competence (Alharbi, 2024; Munandar & Newton, 2021).

Such work is further constrained by time pressures, as the multi-stage process of sourcing, documenting, and adapting cultural content far exceeds standard preparation periods. Teachers reported the psychological strain of extensive preparation demands, the incompatibility between cultural integration and rigid scheduling, and the absence of collaborative support systems, all of which contribute to fatigue and professional isolation (Munro, 2018; Papp & Cottrell, 2021; Yektingtyas & Gultom, 2018). Alongside these logistical barriers, educators must navigate intricate cultural protocols, avoiding themes considered sacred or politically sensitive to safeguard community relationships and respect indigenous intellectual property rights (Anderson, 2015; Gobert, 2014). This balancing act requires advanced cultural competence, particularly in distinguishing between restricted myths and more neutral narratives such as fables, aligning with the principles of culturally sustaining pedagogy (Nieto, 2017; Lorenz et al., 2021). Institutional factors compound these difficulties, as centralized curriculum policies and entrenched perceptions of English language teaching frequently marginalize local cultural content, positioning it as incompatible with international benchmarks. Teachers describe facing both policy-level constraints and ideological resistance from peers, underscoring the systemic rigidity of curriculum design (Agustin et al., 2022; Papp & Cottrell, 2021; Widodo, 2015). Those committed to integrating cultural heritage often work in professional isolation, driven by personal initiative rather than supported by institutional mechanisms. While visible improvements in students' language competence and cultural confidence can gradually influence school-wide attitudes, the process requires resilience, sustained advocacy, and a readiness to challenge established norms (Deroncele-Acosta & Ellis, 2024; Yan, 2022; Alakrash et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

This study explored the integration of Papuan local culture into English reading instruction, focusing on how teachers work within the dual demands of preserving cultural authenticity and meeting formal curriculum requirements. The findings reveal a set of interrelated challenges that collectively constrain effective cultural integration. Documentation scarcity limits access to authentic narratives, as many stories remain in oral form and qualified cultural informants are increasingly difficult to locate. In the absence of

institutional provision, teachers assume multiple roles—researchers, ethnographers, and curriculum designers—while striving to ensure accuracy and cultural respect, often with little time or collaborative support. The demands of developing materials from scratch intensify workload pressures, as each stage—from interviewing elders to adapting texts into accessible English—requires extensive preparation. Teachers also navigate sensitive cultural protocols, avoiding topics considered sacred or potentially contentious and making careful distinctions between permissible and restricted narratives. These classroom-level constraints are compounded by curriculum rigidity and prevailing perceptions that local cultural content is incompatible with international language learning standards, while in some cases educators face professional isolation when their culturally responsive practices diverge from established norms, although persistence and evidence of student benefit can gradually shift peer perspectives.

While the study offers insights into the realities of teaching in this specific context, its scope is limited to a small number of participants in selected Papuan schools and universities, and the qualitative design does not capture measurable student learning outcomes. Future research could broaden the participant base to include varied educational settings across Papua, adopt mixed-method designs to link teacher practices with student achievement, and investigate policy and institutional strategies that could support sustained, collaborative approaches to integrating indigenous knowledge into English reading instruction.

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