

Integrating local culture into web-based mobile-assisted language learning: A mixed-methods study on secondary school EFL students' reading comprehension

ABSTRACT - The insufficient integration of local cultural content into technology-enhanced English instruction may diminish the relevance and pedagogical effectiveness of reading activities in secondary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. This study investigated the extent to which incorporating local culture into a web-based Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) environment improves ninth-grade students' reading comprehension and examined their perceptions of its implementation. Employing a one-group pretest–posttest quasi-experimental design within a mixed-methods framework, the study involved 379 students and two English teachers at an Indonesian secondary school. Quantitative data were collected through pre- and post-tests, while qualitative and perceptual data were obtained from semi-structured interviews and a student attitude questionnaire. The results revealed a statistically significant improvement in reading comprehension, with an average N-Gain score of 0.33, indicating a moderate learning effect. Furthermore, students reported positive perceptions of the platform's cultural relevance and engagement. These findings suggest that culturally responsive MALL-based instruction can enhance both learning outcomes and learner motivation, offering practical implications for integrating local cultural content into technology-enhanced English language teaching at the secondary level.

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1. Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital technology has significantly influenced English language teaching and learning, particularly through the integration of mobile and web-based tools. Within this context, Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) has emerged as a promising approach that enables learners to access instructional materials flexibly and interactively beyond the constraints of traditional classroom settings. Previous studies have demonstrated that MALL can enhance learner engagement, autonomy, and language skill development by incorporating multimedia elements and interactive activities (Boroughani et al., 2023; Stockwell, 2021; Wang et al., 2024). As a result, MALL has been increasingly adopted to address the demands of 21st-century learning, especially in language education.

Despite its pedagogical potential, the implementation of MALL in English language classrooms has often relied on culturally neutral or globalized content, which may not fully reflect learners' local contexts. Research has shown that unfamiliar cultural references in instructional materials can create cognitive and affective barriers for learners, particularly in reading comprehension (Lavrenteva & Orland-Barak, 2023; Toledo-Sandoval, 2020). In contrast, culturally responsive teaching emphasizes the integration of learners' cultural knowledge and experiences to enhance relevance, motivation, and comprehension (Cameron et al., 2024; Liao & Li, 2023). In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context such as Indonesia, where English is rarely used outside the classroom, the inclusion of local culture may play a crucial role in supporting learners' understanding of texts and sustaining their engagement.

Several studies have explored the integration of local culture into English learning materials through storybooks, games, and multimedia resources, reporting positive effects on students' motivation and comprehension (Raihani & Unsiyah, 2024; Ratminingsih & Budasi, 2018; Tita et al., 2020). However, most of these studies focus on young learners or employ non-text-based formats such as games or videos. Limited research has examined the systematic integration of local cultural content into web-based reading texts for secondary school students using a structured instructional design model. Moreover, few studies combine learning outcome measurements with students' attitudinal responses to culturally contextualized MALL environments.

To address this gap, the present study developed and implemented a local culture-based web application for English reading instruction using a one-group pretest–posttest quasi-experimental design within a mixed-methods framework. Local cultural elements from Kuningan Regency, West Java, were embedded directly into reading texts to provide students with familiar and meaningful contexts. Unlike previous studies, this research focuses on secondary school learners and employs a large sample size, allowing for a more robust examination of learning outcomes and student perceptions.

Accordingly, this study aims to (1) examine the existing English learning practices in secondary schools, (2) investigate the effectiveness of a local culture-based web application in improving students' English reading comprehension, and (3) explore students' attitudes toward the integration of local culture in web-based English reading instruction. The findings are expected to contribute to MALL research by highlighting the pedagogical value of culturally

responsive digital reading materials and offering practical insights for English teachers and curriculum developers in similar EFL contexts.

2. Literature review

This literature review examines key studies related to Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL), reading comprehension in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, and culturally responsive teaching in digital learning environments. It synthesizes theoretical perspectives and empirical findings to highlight how technology-enhanced language learning and cultural relevance have been addressed in previous research. By critically reviewing existing studies, this section identifies gaps in the integration of local cultural content into web-based reading instruction, particularly at the secondary school level. The review thus establishes the theoretical and empirical foundation for the present study and clarifies how it contributes to the broader field of culturally responsive and technology-enhanced English language teaching.

2.1. Mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) in EFL contexts

Mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) has gained increasing attention as an effective approach to supporting language learning through mobile and web-based technologies. Research consistently reports that MALL facilitates flexible access to learning materials, promotes learner autonomy, and enhances engagement through interactive and multimedia features (Lin et al., 2020; Stockwell, 2021). In EFL contexts, where exposure to the target language is often limited to classroom settings, MALL provides opportunities for extended practice beyond instructional time.

Empirical studies have demonstrated positive effects of MALL on various language skills, including vocabulary acquisition, listening, and reading comprehension (Boroughani et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2024). In reading instruction specifically, MALL environments enable learners to interact with texts through hyperlinks, glosses, and multimodal support, which can facilitate comprehension processes. However, much of the existing research emphasizes technological affordances rather than the content embedded within MALL materials. As a result, issues related to cultural relevance and contextual appropriateness of learning materials remain underexplored.

Although prior research has established the pedagogical potential of MALL and the importance of cultural relevance in EFL instruction, several gaps remain. First, there is a lack of studies that systematically integrate local cultural content into web-based MALL reading materials using a structured instructional design model. Second, research focusing on secondary school learners is limited, as most existing studies target primary-level students or higher education contexts. Third, few studies combine learning outcome data with students' attitudinal perspectives to provide a comprehensive evaluation of culturally responsive MALL interventions.

To address these gaps, the present study implements a local culture-based web application for English reading instruction. By embedding local cultural elements directly into reading texts and examining both reading comprehension gains and student attitudes, this study

contributes to the growing body of MALL and culturally responsive EFL research. It positions local culture not as supplementary content, but as a central pedagogical resource within a technology-enhanced learning environment, thereby extending existing literature on culturally responsive digital language instruction.

2.2. Reading comprehension and cultural context in EFL learning

Reading comprehension in EFL learning is a complex cognitive process influenced not only by linguistic proficiency but also by background knowledge and cultural familiarity. Schema theory suggests that readers' prior knowledge plays a crucial role in constructing meaning from texts. When learners encounter culturally unfamiliar content, comprehension may be hindered due to increased cognitive load and limited contextual understanding (Toledo-Sandoval, 2020).

Several studies have shown that culturally relevant texts can enhance learners' comprehension, motivation, and engagement. Ratminingsih and Budasi (2018) found that integrating local culture into English reading materials increased students' interest and facilitated understanding. Similarly, Tosida et al. (2020) reported that culturally contextualized texts supported learners' emotional engagement and reduced anxiety during reading activities. These findings suggest that cultural familiarity can function as a scaffold for comprehension, particularly for learners with lower proficiency levels.

Other previous research (Agustiana et al., 2025) indicates that integrating local cultural content into web-based reading instruction can substantially enhance secondary school students' reading comprehension. Through the use of culturally contextualized texts, students demonstrated notable improvements in comprehension, vocabulary, and grammar, accompanied by more consistent performance across learners. The statistically significant gains and large effect size reported in the study suggest that culturally relevant digital materials can effectively support both cognitive development and learning equity. In addition, students' positive attitudes toward the application highlight the motivational value of culturally responsive instructional tools. Collectively, these findings suggest that local culture-based web applications not only improve academic outcomes but also foster greater engagement and relevance in EFL reading instruction.

Despite these benefits, many widely used English teaching materials continue to rely on global or Western cultural content, which may marginalize local identities and experiences (Richards, 2014). This mismatch is particularly problematic in EFL contexts such as Indonesia, where learners may struggle to relate to unfamiliar cultural references. While previous studies acknowledge the importance of cultural relevance, they often stop at advocating for inclusion without examining how local culture can be systematically integrated into technology-enhanced learning environments. Besides, they have demonstrated that local culture-based websites can improve students' reading comprehension through classroom action research approaches, such studies primarily focus on short-term instructional improvements within a single classroom context. In contrast, the present study adopts a larger-scale, mixed-methods design involving a broader student population and a systematic instructional development process. By combining

quantitative learning outcome data with qualitative insights into instructional practices and student perceptions, this study provides more robust and generalizable evidence for the effectiveness of culturally responsive, web-based reading instruction at the secondary school level.

2.3. Culturally responsive teaching and digital learning

Culturally responsive teaching emphasizes the incorporation of learners' cultural backgrounds into instructional practices to promote equity, relevance, and meaningful learning (Liao & Li, 2023). In language education, this approach involves selecting content that reflects learners' social realities and cultural knowledge, thereby validating their identities and experiences. Recent research suggests that culturally responsive instruction not only enhances affective outcomes, such as motivation and confidence, but also supports cognitive development by enabling learners to activate prior knowledge (Cameron et al., 2024).

In digital learning contexts, culturally responsive approaches have been applied through multimedia resources, games, and storytelling platforms. Guo et al. (2024), for instance, demonstrated that culturally contextualized digital materials increased learner engagement and participation. However, most studies focus on younger learners or rely on non-text-based formats, such as videos or games. Consequently, there is limited empirical evidence on the integration of local culture into web-based reading texts, particularly for secondary school students.

Moreover, existing research often examines either learning outcomes or learner perceptions in isolation. Few studies adopt a holistic approach that combines quantitative measures of reading improvement with students' attitudinal responses to culturally responsive digital instruction. This limitation restricts a comprehensive understanding of how and why culturally contextualized MALL environments influence learning.

3. Method

This study employed a one-group pretest–posttest quasi-experimental design within a mixed-methods framework. The quantitative component examined changes in students' reading comprehension before and after the intervention, while qualitative data were collected to provide contextual insights into instructional implementation and students' perceptions. This design allowed for the measurement of learning improvement following the intervention while supporting quantitative findings with descriptive qualitative evidence.

The study was conducted in a public secondary school in West Java, Indonesia, where English is a compulsory subject. Participants consisted of 379 ninth-grade students enrolled in the 2023/2024 academic year and two English teachers with more than ten years of teaching experience. Purposive sampling was used to select the research site based on the following criteria: (1) implementation of the national curriculum, (2) availability of internet access, and (3) students' familiarity with mobile devices. Ninth-grade students were selected because they possess sufficient foundational English proficiency to engage in reading comprehension tasks and represent typical secondary-level EFL learners.

The intervention was implemented over four weeks, comprising five instructional sessions integrated into regular English classes. Each session lasted 80 minutes, following the school's standard lesson duration:

Session 1: Administration of the pre-test

Sessions 2–4: Implementation of the local culture-based web application

Session 5: Administration of the post-test and student questionnaire

During treatment sessions, teachers acted as facilitators. They introduced lesson objectives, provided technical guidance for accessing the web platform, monitored students' engagement with culturally contextualized reading texts, and led brief discussions to clarify comprehension difficulties. Students worked individually and in small groups to complete reading tasks, vocabulary exercises, and comprehension activities embedded in the application. The intervention was conducted within regular classroom settings to maintain ecological validity.

Ethical approval was obtained from the school authorities prior to data collection. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided consent. All data were anonymized to ensure confidentiality.

3.1. Data collection techniques

To address the research questions, multiple data collection methods were employed.

3.1.1. Interviews

Teacher data were collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing flexibility to explore instructional practices while maintaining consistency across participants. The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions focusing on (1) existing reading instruction practices, (2) integration of technology in the classroom, (3) challenges in teaching reading comprehension, and (4) reflections on the implementation of the web-based intervention.

The interview guide was developed based on the study's research questions and was reviewed by an English education expert to ensure clarity and relevance. Each interview session lasted between 35 and 45 minutes, with an average duration of approximately 40 minutes. All interviews were conducted in Indonesian to facilitate clarity of expression, audio-recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim for thematic analysis.

3.1.2. Reading comprehension tests

A pre-test and post-test design was used to measure students' reading comprehension before and after the intervention. The tests consisted of multiple-choice and short-answer questions aligned with the instructional objectives and reading texts. Test validity was ensured through expert review by English education specialists, while reliability was examined using internal consistency measures. The internal consistency reliability of the test was acceptable (Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$).

3.1.3. Student attitude questionnaire

A Likert-scale questionnaire was administered after the intervention to examine students' attitudes toward the local culture-based web application. The questionnaire covered aspects of learning atmosphere, motivation, usability, and perceived effectiveness. Content validity was established through expert judgment, and reliability was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The questionnaire demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$).

The use of multiple instruments enabled data triangulation, enhancing the study's internal validity.

3.2. Data analysis procedures

Quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed separately and then integrated during interpretation.

3.2.1. Quantitative data analysis

Quantitative data from the pre-test and post-test were analyzed using descriptive statistics and a paired-sample Z-test to determine whether the observed differences were statistically significant. The use of the Z-test was justified by the large sample size ($n = 379$), which satisfies the central limit theorem assumption that sampling distributions approximate normality when $n > 30$. With a large sample and stable variance estimates, the Z-test provides robust and reliable significance testing comparable to the paired-sample t-test. Statistical significance was set at $\alpha = .05$. Additionally, the normalized gain (N-Gain) score was calculated to determine the magnitude of improvement. Questionnaire responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify trends in students' attitudes toward the intervention.

3.2.2. Qualitative data analysis

Interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, involving data familiarization, coding, categorization, and theme interpretation. This process allowed for the identification of recurring patterns related to instructional challenges, technology use, and perceptions of culturally responsive materials.

4. Findings and discussion

This section presents the findings of the study in relation to the three research questions. The results are organized into three subsections: (1) existing English learning practices in secondary schools, based on qualitative data from teacher interviews; (2) the effect of the local culture-based web application on students' English reading comprehension, derived from pre-test and post-test scores; and (3) students' attitudes toward the integration of local culture in web-based English reading instruction, obtained from questionnaire responses. Quantitative findings are reported using descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative findings are presented thematically to provide contextual support for the quantitative results. Together, these findings offer a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness and pedagogical implications of culturally responsive mobile-assisted language learning in the secondary school EFL context.

The findings of this study indicate that English instruction in the investigated secondary school remains predominantly examination-oriented, with instructional practices largely focused on preparing students for standardized assessments. The interview data revealed that teachers rely heavily on government-issued textbooks while supplementing materials to increase engagement and relevance. The qualitative findings suggest that while teachers recognize the need for contextualized and engaging materials, structural constraints limit their ability to consistently implement them.

The second major theme—limited instructional time and heterogeneous student proficiency—further explains the pedagogical challenges faced in this context. Teachers reported difficulty addressing diverse learner needs within fixed classroom hours, often prioritizing syllabus completion over deeper comprehension. This constraint provides an important rationale for integrating web-based learning tools that extend instructional time beyond the classroom. The quantitative results support this interpretation, as students demonstrated statistically significant improvement in reading comprehension following the intervention. Although the one-group pretest–posttest design does not allow for causal comparison with a control group, the moderate N-Gain score indicates meaningful improvement during the implementation period.

Importantly, students' positive perceptions of the culturally contextualized web application suggest that familiarity with local cultural content may enhance engagement and reduce cognitive barriers. The integration of culturally relevant materials appears to support not only comprehension outcomes but also affective dimensions of learning. Together, the qualitative and quantitative findings suggest that technology-enhanced, culturally responsive instruction may provide a practical response to exam-driven pressures and classroom constraints in secondary EFL settings.

4.1. English learning practices in secondary schools

Thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews generated two major themes: (1) exam-oriented instructional practices and (2) instructional constraints related to time and learner diversity.

Regarding the first theme, the analysis stage revealed that English learning in the investigated secondary school remains largely exam-oriented, with instruction primarily focused on preparing students for final assessments. Interviews with two experienced ninth-grade English teachers indicated that although textbooks provided by the government serve as the main instructional resources, teachers frequently supplement them with additional materials sourced from the internet to increase relevance and student engagement. As one teacher explained: “The textbook is our main guide, but sometimes the materials are too general, so we look for additional texts online to make the lessons more interesting for students ” (Teacher 1). This practice reflects teachers' awareness of students' diverse proficiency levels and the limitations of relying solely on standardized textbooks.

However, both teachers identified two persistent challenges: significant variation in students' English proficiency and limited instructional time. One teacher noted: “In one class,

the students' abilities are very different. Some understand quickly, but others need more explanation, and we don't always have enough time" (Teacher 2). Similarly, another teacher emphasized that "Because we must complete the curriculum, sometimes we focus more on finishing the material than exploring it deeply" (Teacher 1). These challenges constrain teachers' ability to provide individualized support and to design engaging learning activities within classroom hours. As a result, instructional flexibility and supplementary learning tools are necessary to address learners' diverse needs. These findings support previous studies suggesting that EFL teachers in examination-driven contexts often struggle to balance curriculum coverage with meaningful learning experience (Keles and Yazan 2023; Sanger and Gleason 2020)

The findings suggest that technology-enhanced learning environments, particularly web-based applications, may offer a practical solution by extending learning beyond the classroom and enabling students to engage with materials at their own pace. When such tools incorporate familiar cultural contexts, they may further reduce learning barriers and increase accessibility for students with varying levels of proficiency.

4.2. The effect of local culture-based web application on reading comprehension

Quantitative analysis of pre-test and post-test scores demonstrated a consistent improvement in students' English reading comprehension following the implementation of the local culture-based web application. The overall mean score increased from 58.4 in the pre-test to 72.5 in the post-test, with an average improvement of 14.1 points. The average N-Gain score of 0.33 indicates a moderate level of learning improvement.

The statistical results confirmed that the improvement was significant, as evidenced by the Z-test value ($Z = 15.45, p < 0.05$). This finding indicates that the integration of local cultural content into web-based reading instruction had a measurable positive effect on students' reading comprehension. These results align with previous MALL studies reporting improved reading outcomes through technology-mediated instruction (Lin et al., 2020; F. Wang et al., 2024)

From a pedagogical perspective, the moderate N-Gain suggests that while the intervention was effective, its impact varied across classes. Classes with lower initial proficiency tended to show greater improvement, whereas classes with higher pre-test scores demonstrated smaller gains. This pattern indicates that culturally contextualized materials may be particularly beneficial for lower- and mid-achieving students by providing familiar content that supports comprehension and reduces cognitive load. When students are already familiar with the cultural context of a text, they can focus more on language processing rather than on understanding unfamiliar content, thereby facilitating deeper comprehension.

The findings support culturally responsive teaching theory, which emphasizes the importance of connecting instructional content to learners' cultural backgrounds to enhance meaning-making and engagement (Cameron et al., 2024; Liao & Li, 2023). By embedding local cultural elements directly into reading texts, the web application enabled students to activate prior knowledge, which is a key factor in successful reading comprehension. This approach also addresses criticisms of globalized ELT materials that often marginalize local identities and experiences (Richards, 2014; Toledo-Sandoval, 2020)

Despite the overall positive impact, the variation in N-Gain scores across classes suggests that the effectiveness of culturally responsive MALL is influenced by contextual factors such as instructional delivery, student engagement levels, and classroom dynamics. This indicates that technology alone is not sufficient; effective integration requires thoughtful pedagogical planning and teacher facilitation.

4.3. Students' attitudes toward local culture-based web learning

Analysis of questionnaire data revealed generally positive student attitudes toward the integration of local culture in web-based English reading instruction. The overall mean attitude score of 3.72 indicates that students perceived the learning experience as engaging and meaningful. Among the five evaluated aspects, classroom learning atmosphere received the highest mean score (3.85), suggesting that culturally familiar content contributed to a more comfortable and interactive learning environment.

Students also reported increased motivation (mean = 3.79), indicating that local cultural references made reading activities more relevant to their lives. This finding supports previous research showing that culturally contextualized materials can enhance learner motivation and emotional engagement in EFL contexts (Q. Guo et al., 2024; Ratminingsih & Budasi, 2018). Motivation is a crucial factor in language learning, particularly for reading, which often requires sustained attention and effort.

The perceived effectiveness of the approach received a slightly lower mean score (3.37), suggesting that while students appreciated the learning experience, some were uncertain about its direct impact on their reading ability. This may reflect differences in students' learning preferences or their expectations of technology-based instruction. Nevertheless, the positive perception of usability (mean = 3.65) indicates that the web application was accessible and did not pose technical barriers, supporting the feasibility of implementing similar tools in secondary school contexts.

Overall, students' responses suggest that integrating local culture into MALL environments enhances affective and contextual dimensions of learning, even if cognitive gains vary among learners. This reinforces the argument that culturally responsive digital instruction contributes not only to academic outcomes but also to learners' sense of relevance and belonging in the learning process.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the integration of local cultural content into a web-based Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) environment to support English reading instruction at the secondary school level in Indonesia. Employing a one-group pretest–posttest quasi-experimental design within a mixed-methods framework, the findings revealed a statistically significant improvement in students' reading comprehension, reflected in a moderate N-Gain score of 0.33, alongside positive student perceptions of the culturally contextualized web application in terms of engagement, relevance, and learning motivation. The study contributes empirically to MALL and EFL research by demonstrating that local culture can be systematically embedded into web-

based reading instruction to facilitate measurable learning improvement, while the large secondary-school sample enhances the robustness and contextual relevance of the findings within comparable EFL settings. Furthermore, by integrating quantitative learning outcomes with qualitative insights from teachers and students, the study offers a more comprehensive understanding of how culturally responsive digital instruction operates in examination-driven educational contexts, with practical implications for addressing common classroom challenges such as heterogeneous proficiency levels and limited instructional time through extended learning opportunities beyond classroom hours. Despite these contributions, several limitations must be acknowledged, including the absence of a control group limiting causal inference and the intervention's confinement to a single regional context over a relatively short duration; future research employing comparative or longitudinal designs across diverse regions and language skills is therefore encouraged to further examine the sustained impact of culturally responsive MALL. Overall, this study highlights the potential of aligning technology-enhanced English instruction with learners' cultural contexts to promote meaningful, contextually relevant, and motivationally supportive learning experiences.

Declaration on the use of AI

The author used Artificial Intelligence (AI)-assisted tools solely to support language editing, grammar refinement, clarity improvement, and manuscript organization during the preparation of this article. All research design, data collection, analysis, interpretation of findings, and final academic decisions were conducted entirely by the author. The author takes full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the content presented in this manuscript.

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