Local Culture-Based Literacy Instruction and Its Impact on Students' Critical Reading Skills in Eastern Indonesia

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Abstract

This study explores how local culture-based literacy instruction enhances students' critical reading skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms in three secondary schools in Ternate, Eastern Indonesia, SMAN 5 Ternate, SMAN 8 Ternate, and MAN 1 Ternate. The research addresses the dominance of conventional, text-centered literacy practices that confine learners to literal comprehension and hinder interpretive engagement. Drawing on Ternate's oral traditions, royal histories, and maritime folklore, the study examines how integrating local narratives into reading activities promotes deeper, culturally grounded literacy. Using a qualitative multiple-case design, data were collected through classroom observations, interviews, and analysis of students' reading journals. Thematic analysis combined critical literacy theory with sociocultural literacy perspectives to capture how learners negotiated meaning. Findings reveal that embedding local cultural content fosters inferential thinking, contextual understanding, and critical reflection, while increasing motivation and dialogic participation. However, constraints such as teachers' limited capacity for culturally responsive pedagogy and the pressure of standardized assessments remain. The study's novelty lies in formulating the Culturally Situated Critical Reading Framework, positioning reading as a socially mediated act linking identity, culture, and cognition. The research contributes to advancing critical literacy pedagogy, promoting culturally relevant language education, and expanding sociocultural perspectives in literacy studies.

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INTRODUCTION

The persistent issue of low critical reading skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms in Eastern Indonesia, particularly in Ternate City, remains a fundamental challenge in literacy education. In most secondary schools, reading instruction continues to follow conventional patterns that treat texts merely as objects of memorization and literal comprehension (Alakrash & Razak, 2021; Winhar, 2022). Students are often encouraged to identify explicit meanings, answer factual questions, or translate words, rather than being guided to interpret, critique, or connect the text to their sociocultural realities. Such practices foster a superficial form of literacy, limited to recognizing linguistic forms, without cultivating reflective awareness of the messages, ideologies, and social contexts embedded within texts. In the face of 21st-century demands for critical, analytical, and reflective thinking, literacy must be understood not merely as the ability to read and write but as a way of deeply

understanding the world (Hamiddin & Saukah, 2020; Lestari et al., 2022).

This situation is further complicated by the fact that teaching materials used in schools often fail to reflect students' sociocultural realities. Nationally distributed English textbooks predominantly feature Western-centric narratives, stories of urban life in London or New York, for instance, that feel distant from the everyday experiences of Ternate students. Consequently, learners struggle to establish emotional and cognitive connections with the texts they read (Muslim et al., 2020). Meanwhile, Ternate possesses rich cultural resources: oral traditions surrounding the Sultanate, maritime legends, and moral values embedded in local folklore. Unfortunately, such local sources are rarely integrated into literacy classrooms. Yet, culturally grounded literacy could serve as a meaningful bridge between students' learning experiences and their cultural identities.

Previous studies have demonstrated the potential of culture-based learning in strengthening literacy and critical thinking competencies. Dinamika and Hanafiah (2019) and Gustine (2018) highlight that culturally responsive teaching not only enhances academic understanding but also fosters social awareness and a sense of belonging. Within the Indonesian context, Alakrash and Razak (2021) as well as Wongsa and Son (2022) found that integrating cultural values into English instruction encourages students to reflect on the social meanings behind texts rather than merely understanding them linguistically. Similarly, research conducted in Ambon by Apituley et al. (2022) and Tabelessy and Umkeketony (2022) shows that incorporating local narratives in reading lessons helps students comprehend both discourse structures and moral values inherent in local culture. Hukubun et al. (2022) and Wenno et al. (2021) further argue that culturally rooted literacy enhances learning motivation while shaping students' cultural identity awareness.

Globally, El-Daly (2019) and Peters (2022), through the Four Resources Model, emphasize that critical readers are not merely decoders of linguistic signs but also text users, meaning-makers, and critical analysts capable of questioning the ideologies underlying texts. This view aligns with the framework of critical literacy (Crookes, 2022), which posits that reading is a political act, an effort to understand and transform social realities through texts. Similarly, Akrong (2019), through the concept of New Literacy Studies, argues that literacy should be viewed as a social practice inherently tied to cultural contexts. Hence, critical reading competence cannot be separated from individuals' interactions with cultural values, symbols, and experiences. From this perspective, literacy instruction that neglects local culture risks losing its social dimension and alienating students from meaningful engagement with texts.

Empirical studies across Southeast Asia further illustrate the relevance of culturally grounded literacy approaches. Mali (2023) and Septiana (2020) in Central Java found that local-culture-based instruction enhanced students' inferential reading skills in narrative texts. In Malaysia, Wijaya and Ong (2018) observed that contextual approaches using local folktales strengthened students' analytical engagement with academic texts. Likewise, Le (2023) in China emphasized the importance of integrating cultural schema in foreign language reading instruction, enabling students to relate foreign texts to their cognitive and cultural

frameworks. Additional studies (Mubarok & Budiono, 2022; Oktavianti & Prayogi, 2022) revealed that when students engage with texts rooted in their cultural backgrounds, they exhibit greater improvement in understanding implicit meanings and posing reflective questions about the text.

Despite these findings, most existing studies remain focused on cultural understanding and learning motivation, with limited exploration of how local-culture-based literacy can facilitate critical reading in EFL contexts. Hussain et al. (2020) and Nugroho and Mutiaraningrum (2020), for instance, emphasize affective and identity aspects but do not explicitly connect them with critical reading processes. Similarly, Pranoto and Suprayogi (2021) and Tuan (2021) utilized local materials to enhance reading interest but did not examine how cultural integration influences students' meaning construction and ideological reflection. Although international studies such as Lee and Xie (2023) and Naghdipour (2022) highlight the importance of critical literacy, few have linked this approach to local cultural contexts in Eastern Indonesia, where multilingual and multicultural dynamics are distinctive.

The context of Ternate presents a unique and underexplored dimension. As a historic city in North Maluku, Ternate retains a strong cultural heritage and social system rooted in collectivism, ancestral respect, and environmental harmony. These cultural resources provide fertile ground for developing meaningful literacy instruction. However, prior studies in Eastern Indonesia have mostly focused on language acquisition and learning motivation rather than on critical literacy dimensions. Therefore, there remains a research gap in examining how Ternate's local culture can serve as a pedagogical foundation for cultivating critical reading skills in English language teaching.

This gap becomes more evident given that many teachers in the region lack specialized training in developing teaching materials that integrate local culture with critical literacy goals. As noted by Ismiatun and Suhartoyo (2022), many teachers are constrained by national curriculum demands and standardized testing pressures, leaving little room for pedagogical innovation. Consequently, reading instruction tends to be procedural, offering limited opportunities for reflective interpretation. Conversely, Rasman (2018) found that when students were encouraged to read and discuss texts connected to their own social lives, they demonstrated significant improvement in expressing opinions and questioning ideological biases. These findings underscore the need for a more contextual and dialogic literacy pedagogy that bridges the gap between text and lived experience.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to offer a new perspective on culturally grounded literacy instruction. Rather than treating culture as an additional context or ornament, this study positions culture at the core of reading and critical thinking processes. Reading is thus understood not merely as a cognitive activity but as a sociocultural practice that shapes how learners construct meaning from the world around them. By exploring how local texts, such as folktales, maritime legends, and historical narratives of Ternate, can serve as learning materials, this study opens dialogic space between language, culture, and critical consciousness.

This study is grounded in the belief that culture-based literacy not only enriches learning experiences but also nurtures reflective, analytical, and contextually aware readers. Such an approach enables students to build meaningful bridges between the foreign language they learn and their own cultural identities, rendering the reading process relevant, meaningful, and transformative. Accordingly, this research contributes not only to pedagogical practice in EFL classrooms but also to the broader scholarship of critical literacy in Indonesia. Overall, the study aims to examine how integrating local culture into literacy instruction can enhance students' critical reading skills in Ternate while proposing a conceptual model that positions culture as a key mediator in text interpretation and reflection.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using a multiple-case study design. This design was selected because the study aimed not to establish causal relationships or test hypotheses statistically, but to understand in depth the processes, meanings, and subjective experiences emerging from culture-based literacy practices in English classrooms. As Creswell and Creswell (2018) and Ritter (2022) suggest, qualitative inquiry allows researchers to explore complex social and pedagogical dynamics within natural settings, such as classrooms, where learning phenomena authentically unfold. Hence, this approach was deemed appropriate for examining how the interaction between local culture, teaching strategies, and students' critical reading skills takes shape in daily school practice.

The study was conducted in three secondary schools in Ternate City: SMAN 5 Ternate, SMAN 8 Ternate, and MAN 1 Ternate. These schools were purposively selected to represent variations in educational contexts across Eastern Indonesia in terms of student characteristics, sociocultural background, and institutional resources. Moreover, each school had begun initial efforts to incorporate local cultural elements into classroom activities, albeit thematically limited. Ternate's unique historical and cultural background, such as its Sultanate heritage, maritime traditions, and collective social practices, further justified its selection as an ideal context for exploring the potential of culture-based literacy in fostering EFL students' critical thinking.

The research participants consisted of English teachers and students directly involved in culture-based reading instruction. There were nine key informants: three English teachers (one from each school) and six students selected based on specific criteria, active participation in reading activities and the ability to articulate reflective insights about the texts. A purposive sampling strategy was applied since the study prioritized depth of understanding rather than statistical generalization (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Teachers were chosen for their experience designing and implementing literacy instruction, while students represented diverse social backgrounds and reading proficiency levels.

Data collection employed three primary techniques: classroom observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Observations were conducted in a participatory manner to capture natural interactions between teachers and students during reading sessions. This

allowed the researcher to examine how teachers utilized local texts, how students responded, and how discussions and reflections unfolded. The observation data were supplemented by semi-structured interviews with both teachers and students to explore their perceptions, experiences, and challenges during the learning process, consistent with Maher and Dertadian's (2018) recommendations.

Additionally, documents such as reading journals, student reflections, and teachers' lesson plans were analyzed to triangulate findings and provide concrete illustrations of how local texts were employed to stimulate critical reflection. Thematic analysis was then conducted following the framework proposed by Cheron et al. (2022), involving iterative reading, open coding, categorization, and interpretation to identify emerging themes that describe the relationship between local culture and students' critical reading skills.

To ensure data validity and credibility, the study adopted both source and methodological triangulation. Source triangulation involved cross-verifying information from multiple informants, teachers and students, and comparing findings across observation, interview, and document data. Methodological triangulation was achieved by integrating multiple data collection methods to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon (Khan, 2019). Furthermore, member checking was employed by returning interpreted findings to participants for validation to ensure that the meanings accurately represented their perspectives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From Text-Centered Literacy to Culturally Responsive Reading Practices

Literacy instruction in secondary schools in Ternate initially displayed a highly conventional pattern, focusing primarily on text and literal comprehension. Observations conducted in three schools, SMAN 5 Ternate, SMAN 8 Ternate, and MAN 1 Ternate, revealed that reading activities in English classes were largely directed toward locating explicit answers within the text or interpreting difficult vocabulary, with little encouragement for critical thinking or connections between the text and students' sociocultural contexts. Teachers typically began lessons by reading passages from textbooks and then assigning comprehension questions. In one observed lesson at SMAN 8 Ternate, the teacher explicitly stated that the main goal of reading instruction was for students to "answer questions correctly according to the text." Such a pattern reflects a text-centered literacy paradigm, in which the text is positioned as an authoritative source and meaning is seen as residing within words rather than being co-constructed through interaction between reader, context, and lived experience (Vasquez et al., 2019).

However, notable changes emerged when several teachers began integrating local narratives into reading activities. One example was observed in an English class at SMAN 5 Ternate, where the reading material was not taken from an international textbook but was instead composed around the history of the Ternate Sultanate, specifically the diplomatic relations between Sultan Baabullah and the Portuguese and Spanish. In this session, classroom interactions became more vibrant; students engaged in discussions, raised

questions, and linked the story to family narratives they had heard. One student commented that he "had just realized that the story of Sultan Baabullah could also be learned through English," reflecting a growing sense of pride and emotional connection to the learning material.

A similar condition was observed at MAN 1 Ternate, where the teacher introduced the local legend of Nuku as reading material. When students were asked to interpret Nuku as a character who resisted colonialism, some connected the story to issues of social justice they observed in their everyday lives. As one teacher noted, students "find it easier to write opinions and participate in discussions when the text relates to something they know or have heard at home." This suggests that local culture integration not only enhances learning motivation but also broadens students' interpretive space in understanding texts.

This phenomenon can be explained through the framework of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP), which Luke (2018a) emphasized as an educational approach that not only transfers universal academic skills but also affirms and sustains learners' cultural identities. In the context of Ternate, local culture-based instruction allows students to perceive English not as a foreign language detached from their lives but as a medium to express their community's values, stories, and collective memories. Reading, in this sense, becomes a site for negotiating social meanings rather than merely decoding linguistic information.

Observations and interviews further indicated that this pedagogical shift transformed teachers' perceptions of their own roles. Whereas teachers previously viewed their task as ensuring literal comprehension of texts, they began positioning themselves as facilitators of dialogue and reflection. A teacher at SMAN 5 Ternate remarked that teaching through local cultural texts allowed her to "know the students through their identities, not just their language abilities." This implies that local culture-based literacy practices not only change students' learning behaviors but also reshape teachers' understanding of the nature of language learning itself.

Emotional engagement among students also increased significantly. During the reading of the Nuku legend, students responded enthusiastically to parts of the story depicting courage and resistance. Some added personal or familial knowledge about the character, drawn from oral traditions. Observational data revealed that students increasingly used reflective expressions such as "I think," "I feel," or "in Ternate today…", signifying a shift from literal comprehension to contextual and reflective meaning-making, which lies at the core of critical reading from a sociocultural perspective (Amgott, 2018).

This transformation, however, was not without challenges. Some teachers remained resistant, arguing that local culture-based instruction was less relevant to national exam demands emphasizing linguistic and textual structures. As one SMAN 8 Ternate teacher commented, "We still have to teach reading comprehension question types that appear on exams." This tension highlights the persistent divide between an instrumental academic orientation and a more humanistic, culturally grounded pedagogy. Nevertheless, participating teachers generally acknowledged that when texts were culturally contextualized, students became more active in discussion and less afraid of expressing opinions.

Theoretically, this shift reinforces the view that literacy is not a neutral skill but a socially situated practice embedded within cultural contexts (Luke, 2018b). By incorporating local narratives into reading instruction, students process texts not merely as linguistic information but as spaces to negotiate identity and social positioning. Through discussions of the values embedded in local stories, students learn to read critically, asking who speaks, what values are represented, and how meanings are constructed in specific social contexts.

From the perspective of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy, integrating local culture into reading instruction in Ternate represents an effort to cultivate identity awareness through language. As Leander and Burriss (2020) argue, culturally sustaining learning not only maintains students' languages and cultures but also expands the possibilities for identity expression within the classroom. In this context, Ternate students learn that becoming critical readers also means belonging to a cultural community with its own voice, history, and worldview.

Observational findings also indicate a close relationship between emotional engagement and enhanced critical understanding. When students perceive that texts resonate with their lived experiences, they become more active in interpreting, comparing, and critiquing the reading materials. A teacher at MAN 1 Ternate noted that students "become more confident in challenging the text when the story does not match the version they know." Such responses illustrate that local culture-based instruction not only increases motivation but also provides a space for critical and reflective thinking.

Dialogic Literacy and the Emergence of Critical Reading Awareness

The shift from one-directional literacy instruction to dialogic reading practices emerged as one of the most salient findings of this study. Across the three research sites, SMAN 5 Ternate, SMAN 8 Ternate, and MAN 1 Ternate, there was a marked change in classroom interaction dynamics when teaching materials incorporated local cultural elements. Previously, classrooms were relatively rigid, with teachers acting as the sole source of knowledge and students responding to predetermined questions. Now, lessons became livelier through discussion, questioning, and even light debate among students. This transformation signifies a movement from monologic approaches toward dialogic literacy, in which reading becomes a social process open to interpretation, negotiation, and reflection.

At SMAN 5 Ternate, for instance, when students read a text titled The Courage of Sultan Baabullah, the teacher did not immediately ask comprehension questions. Instead, she opened the session by asking, "What do you think courage meant for a leader at that time?" The open-ended question stimulated peer discussion, leading students to connect the story to their own perspectives on leadership today. One student noted that a good leader is not only physically strong but also fair and protective of their people. The teacher responded by linking this view to leadership values in Ternate culture, which emphasize moral responsibility. Through such interactions, reading transformed into a dialogue among perspectives rather than a search for right or wrong answers.

According to Janks (2018), dialogic pedagogy creates spaces for learners to build meaning through social interaction and collective reflection. This framework aptly explains

how local culture-based reading fosters environments that nurture critical awareness. Students read not only to comprehend textual information but also to negotiate meaning and relate it to their lived experiences. In one MAN 1 Ternate class, students reading The Sea Brothers, a tale of fishermen's solidarity in northern Ternate, remarked that the story reminded them of their community's tradition of baku tolong (mutual help). The teacher guided discussion on how such solidarity values might apply in modern contexts, prompting critical reflection on social ethics and cultural continuity.

Interview data support this finding. A student (pseudonym LM) expressed that he felt "more comfortable speaking in class when the topic relates to everyday life." He explained that reading about local heroes or kings gave him "something to say" because he had heard similar stories from family members. A teacher at SMAN 8 Ternate confirmed that "students are more active when the text reflects their own culture rather than distant contexts." These responses show that classroom dialogue arises not only from pedagogical technique but also from the emotional and identity connections students feel with the texts.

Classroom observations revealed a more dynamic and participatory atmosphere during such discussions. At SMAN 8 Ternate, for instance, students worked in small groups to exchange views on the moral messages of Nuku and the Power of Unity. Some wrote their opinions on the board while others offered contrasting interpretations. The teacher acted as a facilitator who kept the discussion focused on meaning and values without imposing a single "correct" answer. In this environment, students developed inferential skills, drawing implicit meanings and constructing culturally grounded arguments.

This pedagogical shift also altered communication patterns between teachers and students. Whereas teachers once dominated classroom talk, the proportion of student speaking time nearly doubled compared to lessons using national textbooks. Teachers ceased to be knowledge providers and became facilitators encouraging inquiry and reflection. One teacher, referred to as Ms. N, stated, "I learned to listen more to students' perspectives, because they have so many interesting ways to connect with the text." This indicates that dialogic learning requires teachers to rethink classroom authority and knowledge transmission.

Dialogic literacy practices also transformed assessment methods. In several classes, teachers replaced multiple-choice tests with reflective writing tasks, asking students to respond to the moral dimensions of texts. Analysis of these writings revealed improved argumentative ability: students did not merely summarize but articulated personal opinions with logical reasoning and contextual examples. For instance, one student, writing about Baabullah's Wisdom, stated that "a leader's courage is not only in fighting enemies but in resisting greed within himself." This sentence exemplifies critical thinking and moral reflection emerging from dialogic reading.

Conceptually, such learning demonstrates that critical reading is a social rather than purely cognitive process. Cleovoulou and Beach (2019) emphasize that critical thinking develops through meaningful conversations where ideas are tested, contrasted, and reconstructed in social contexts. In Ternate's culturally grounded classrooms, such dialogue

occurs naturally because students perceive the texts as relevant to their social lives. Textual meaning becomes fluid and negotiated through reflective interaction.

The findings also indicate that critical reading awareness, the capacity to read reflectively and evaluate textual ideas, cannot thrive in monologic environments. It develops within dialogic spaces that allow students to question, interpret, and relate texts to their sociocultural values. A teacher at MAN 1 Ternate observed that after implementing local culture-based learning, she noticed "a change in how students answer questions, they no longer seek single correct answers but try to explain their reasoning." This illustrates that dialogism is not merely a pedagogical technique but a cognitive disposition that fosters students' intellectual autonomy.

Local Narratives as Cognitive and Cultural Scaffolds for Critical Thinking

In the implementation of local culture–based literacy instruction in Ternate, traditional narratives such as folktales, royal chronicles, and maritime legends served not merely as sources of reading texts but also as cognitive and cultural scaffolds that helped students bridge English learning with their social context and lived experiences. Through these narratives, students did not only acquire linguistic structures or new vocabulary but also activated their culturally embedded schemas. For instance, during classroom observations at SMAN 8 Ternate, when the teacher introduced a text titled "The Oath of Sultan Baabullah," students quickly grasped its narrative pattern, character introduction, conflict, climax, and resolution, because it mirrored the familiar structures of local stories they had encountered at home or in community gatherings.

This phenomenon illustrates that local culture performs a dual role in literacy development: as a cognitive scaffold that facilitates inferential reasoning and as a cultural scaffold that provides emotional resonance and identity formation. According to Low et al. (2021) and Wong et al. (2021), within the framework of Sociocultural Literacy Mediation, literacy processes are inseparable from the sociocultural contexts in which they occur. Meaning in literacy is co-constructed through the interaction among linguistic symbols, social practices, and cultural experiences. In the case of Ternate, this interaction becomes evident as students read texts grounded in local traditions and values, English, initially perceived as foreign, becomes more comprehensible when linked to familiar cultural experiences.

An illustrative case emerged in a MAN 1 Ternate classroom, where students engaged with "The Sailor's Promise," an adapted story highlighting loyalty and responsibility among seafarers. During the discussion, the teacher connected the story's moral lesson to the local maritime ritual of "sumpah laut" (sea oath), still practiced by coastal communities. Students responded enthusiastically, sharing personal family stories about their fathers or grandfathers who upheld honesty as a virtue in seafaring life. When asked to write reflections on the story's moral message, most students went beyond literal comprehension and interpreted the sea as a metaphor for the trials of human existence. This reflective process demonstrates how local cultural contexts enhance students' higher-order interpretive abilities, identifying symbolism, evaluating moral dimensions, and discerning value-laden biases in texts.

Evidence from students' reading journals supports this pattern. One student (RT) noted that the story "Baabullah's Wisdom" reminded him of his grandfather's advice to "control one's heart when in power." He then reflected that leadership should be measured not by strength alone but also by wisdom. Such reflections indicate that local cultural texts facilitate not only linguistic comprehension but also deeper ethical and social awareness. This aligns with Vygotsky's notion of mediated learning, where new knowledge is acquired through familiar cultural tools (Lim et al., 2019; Robinson, 2019).

Classroom observations further reinforced this interpretation. At SMAN 5 Ternate, for example, the teacher used the local folktale "The Stone Princess of Moti Island." Initially, the story was read in English, followed by a comparison with its local version in the regional language. The discussion evolved as students identified differences in characterization and moral emphasis between the two versions. The teacher guided them to question: "Why does the local version emphasize sacrifice, while the English version focuses on beauty?" This question encouraged students to think critically about cultural perspectives and the underlying ideologies embedded in texts. Hence, literacy instruction extended beyond language learning toward critical awareness of cultural differences and value systems.

Interviews with teachers also revealed growing pedagogical consciousness. One teacher at MAN 1 Ternate (pseudonymized as Ms. H.) explained that incorporating local narratives helped students comprehend foreign texts "without feeling intimidated by English." She added, "Local stories act as bridges, they learn the language while remembering who they are." This perspective echoes Brown et al. (2019), who argue that literacy is a socially mediated process connecting identity and symbolic representation.

In the context of critical reading, local narratives also function as scaffolds that enable students to detect bias and ideology in texts. For instance, at SMAN 8 Ternate, students compared two readings: a textbook passage depicting European colonialism in neutral terms and a local story recounting the Ternate people's resistance against colonizers. Students exposed to the local text were more perceptive in identifying power imbalances in the colonial narrative, stating that the textbook version was "too biased" or "unfair toward local people." This demonstrates that reading through one's cultural lens fosters epistemic courage to question dominant narratives, an essential skill in critical literacy.

The development of interpretive competence did not occur instantly but evolved through sustained engagement with culturally contextualized reading experiences. Early observations revealed students' tendency to rely on literal translation, but after several weeks of exposure to local texts, they began asking reflective questions such as "Why did the character act that way?" or "What is hidden behind this sentence?" Such questioning signals a cognitive shift from surface-level comprehension to deeper meaning construction.

From a sociocultural standpoint, this process represents internalization, where local cultural meanings are internalized as individual cognitive tools (Underwood & Mensah, 2018). Local narratives thus mediate between foreign texts and students' critical consciousness. By understanding symbols, moral values, and social relations within their own culture, students learn to read foreign texts more reflectively and contextually. In other words, local culture

functions not merely as teaching material but as a living instrument for critical thinking.

Notably, this finding highlights the role of culture as a formative space for literate identity. When students see themselves reflected in the texts, through values such as solidarity, leadership wisdom, or natural symbolism, they not only comprehend the story but also strengthen their sense of belonging to both language and culture. This aligns with Ladson-Billings' (2021b) view that literacy is a social practice rooted in community experience and values. Hence, local culture–based literacy instruction in Ternate fosters interpretive competence while simultaneously cultivating self-awareness and cultural pride as integral components of critical thinking.

Challenges in Implementing Culturally Responsive Critical Literacy

The implementation of local culture–based literacy pedagogy in Ternate's secondary schools reveals a complex interplay between pedagogical idealism and the standardized realities of the education system. Although the integration of local narratives, such as the legend of Nuku, the history of the Ternate Sultanate, and maritime traditions, has enriched students' reading experiences and nurtured critical awareness, its classroom enactment faces multiple professional and structural constraints. Based on classroom observations and interviews, two main challenges emerged: (1) limited teacher competence in designing literacy activities that foster critical reflection, and (2) the pressures of a national assessment system emphasizing cognitive–literal performance.

At SMAN 8 Ternate, teachers were often caught between adhering to curriculum demands and experimenting with culturally responsive teaching. For instance, during a reading session on "Leadership in Traditional Society," the teacher initially related the text to the figure of Sultan Baabullah, but soon reverted to multiple-choice drills for exam preparation. The teacher later admitted that time constraints and the obligation to complete the syllabus left little room for reflective discussion. As teacher I.N. explained, she often "wanted to extend discussions on cultural values but feared not completing the required competencies."

This tension mirrors what Ladson-Billings (2021a) identified as a global challenge in culturally responsive pedagogy, particularly in developing countries where standardized examinations are prioritized as indicators of educational quality. In Ternate, this pressure is reinforced by bureaucratic cultures that measure teacher success through students' test scores rather than their development of critical or reflective literacy. Consequently, while teachers acknowledge the pedagogical potential of local culture, they feel institutionally constrained from implementing it consistently.

Professional capacity also remains limited. Analysis of teaching documents and classroom notes shows that most teachers rely on linguistically oriented national textbooks, with minimal adaptation to students' cultural realities. As one teacher (L.A.) noted, they were "not used to creating original materials" because training programs typically emphasize conventional reading strategies such as skimming and scanning, rather than culturally grounded critical reading. This indicates that teacher limitations stem not only from individual factors but also from systemic neglect of culturally responsive literacy in teacher training.

Similar dynamics appeared at MAN 1 Ternate. When a teacher introduced the local folktale "Doro Mangasa," students initially responded with enthusiasm, engaging in lively discussions about moral values and social roles. However, when instructed to complete literal comprehension worksheets ("What is the main character's name?"; "Where does the story take place?"), classroom interaction quickly became passive again. This pattern shows that changing materials alone does not transform literacy practice if the pedagogy remains monologic and answer-oriented. As teacher M.R. reflected, "Sometimes students are ready to think critically, but I'm not sure how to guide them without departing from the school's grading format."

From a theoretical perspective, this situation supports McLaughlan and Lodge's (2019) argument that contextual pedagogy can only thrive when educational systems allow for epistemological diversity. Within this framework, local culture–based literacy is not merely about content selection but demands a paradigm shift in educational policy, from homogeneity and centralization toward inclusivity and decentralization. This need is particularly urgent in Eastern Indonesia, where rich sociocultural diversity contrasts sharply with the uniformity of national assessment models.

Resource limitations further compound the challenge. Teachers often struggle to find culturally representative literacy materials appropriate to students' language levels. Some resort to translating or adapting oral traditions from elders. A teacher at SMAN 5 Ternate (Y.H.) recounted having to "rewrite my grandfather's story in English because no ready-to-use version existed." While creative, such efforts are labor-intensive and not feasible for all teachers.

Student interactions also reflected the indirect consequences of these pedagogical gaps. When local texts were used, students demonstrated higher emotional and cognitive engagement, often initiating discussions and forming arguments. However, without structured guidance, these discussions sometimes devolved into unfocused storytelling rather than critical reflection. In one observed session, a discussion about the Sultan's anti-colonial struggle lost direction due to the absence of guiding questions that could connect historical values to contemporary social issues. This underscores the importance of teachers' roles as critical facilitators, a role still in development.

At the policy level, these findings underscore the need for reform in evaluation systems to accommodate culturally grounded and reflective literacy practices. Overemphasis on standardized testing constrains both teacher creativity and students' potential for critical awareness. As McLaughlan and Lodge (2019) emphasize, without structural reform in accountability systems, pedagogical innovations often remain at the level of individual initiative. In contexts like Ternate, where cultural heritage and communal values are deeply embedded, culturally responsive literacy should be recognized not merely as a pedagogical approach but as a means of integrating education with the living social fabric.

The Culturally Situated Critical Reading Framework: Reframing Literacy as a Socially Mediated Act

This section serves as a conceptual synthesis that integrates the empirical findings and articulates the central argument of this study, namely, that reading practices in EFL contexts, particularly in Ternate, should not be conceived merely as individual cognitive processes aimed at text comprehension, but as socially mediated acts that negotiate meaning through the intersection of culture, identity, and critical consciousness. Drawing from classroom observations, teacher and student interviews, and reading journal analyses, the study formulates the Culturally Situated Critical Reading Framework (CSCRF). This framework positions literacy as a culturally and socially grounded practice, while simultaneously serving as a medium through which learners engage in critical reflection on their social realities.

In practice, the CSCRF comprises three interrelated components: cultural mediation, dialogic engagement, and critical reflection. Together, these elements create a recursive process in which students do not merely read texts, but also "read the world" around them. Observations at SMAN 5 Ternate illustrate this dynamic when a teacher connected an English text titled Conflict and Resistance with local narratives of the Maluku Utara people's struggle as reflected in the Nuku legend. Students were not only decoding linguistic structures but also interpreting values of resistance and solidarity within their own sociohistorical context. One student, referred to as A.M., commented that reading such texts made them "feel as if talking to the past," as they could relate the values in the story to their cultural identity as Ternate natives. This suggests that culture functions as both a cognitive and affective bridge that activates collective memory and personal experience in the act of meaning-making.

The concept of cultural mediation within this framework underscores the role of local culture as a cognitive and emotional entry point through which students construct textual meaning. This aligns with La Serna's (2020) argument that critical literacy cannot be detached from the sociopolitical context in which it operates. Culture, therefore, is not a mere backdrop but an epistemic resource that shapes how learners interpret texts. Field observations indicate that when reading materials incorporate local elements, such as maritime narratives or stories of sultanate leadership, students more readily grasp the symbols and moral implications embedded within. For instance, in a class at MAN 1 Ternate, when students read an adapted version of the legend Tidore and the Moon, they immediately associated it with local notions of balance and communal responsibility. They did not simply understand the narrative; they interpreted its moral message as a reflection of their community's values.

This process demonstrates that reading in multicultural contexts develops not only linguistic skills but also self-awareness. As one teacher (N.L.) observed, when students read local stories in English, they "are not only learning grammar but also learning who they are and where they come from." Such statements reflect how cultural dimensions operate as social mediators enriching literacy practices. Within the CSCRF, cultural mediation is not treated as peripheral context but as a mechanism enabling the connection between linguistic representation and lived experience.

However, cultural mediation is effective only when supported by dialogic engagement, the second core component of the framework. Observations reveal that dialogic classroom interaction acts as a catalyst for developing critical consciousness. At SMAN 8 Ternate, for example, classroom dynamics became more reflective when the teacher facilitated open discussion on a text titled The Sea and the People, inspired by coastal community narratives. Students moved beyond answering factual questions to engaging in peer-to-peer argumentation. One student noted that the story reflected social inequality between fishermen and urban traders, prompting broader discussion on local economic justice. In this sense, dialogue functioned not merely as information exchange but as a form of critical literacy praxis that enabled students to "read" the social structures underlying the text.

Handayani and Damayanti (2025) support this view, asserting that authentic literacy can only flourish within interactive spaces that allow for the negotiation of meaning. Within the CSCRF, dialogic engagement is thus conceptualized not simply as a pedagogical technique, but as an epistemological structure where meaning emerges through social co-construction. Students learn not through rote memorization but through the collaborative negotiation of ideas grounded in their collective experiences. Field data indicate that teachers who successfully foster such dialogic spaces are those who position themselves not as the sole authority of knowledge, but as facilitators of reflection.

The third component, critical reflection, emerges as the synthesis of the previous two. When students experience cultural mediation and dialogic engagement, they begin to develop critical awareness toward both text and context. Analysis of student reading journals revealed a consistent shift from literal comprehension toward moral and ideological interpretation. One student from SMAN 5 Ternate, for instance, wrote that "the story about Sultan Baabullah made me realize that struggle is not only about war but about defending dignity and justice." Such reflections demonstrate that reading had evolved from decoding to evaluating and connecting textual meaning to broader moral and social realities.

Elleman and Oslund (2019) conceptualize critical literacy as an effort to connect power, identity, and culture within every act of reading. The CSCRF operationalizes this idea in the Ternate context by positioning critical reflection as the culmination of culturally grounded literacy processes. Here, critical reading is not viewed as a detached academic exercise but as a social process enabling students to reexamine the values shaping their lives. As one teacher (Y.H.) noted, students often "see their own social reality differently after reading cultural texts," particularly when discussing issues such as justice, leadership, and solidarity within the North Maluku community.

The Culturally Situated Critical Reading Framework, therefore, repositions literacy not merely as a linguistic skill but as a social act central to identity formation and critical awareness. Reading becomes a reflective practice wherein language bridges text and world, individual and community. When students engage with culturally rooted texts, they cultivate not only linguistic competence but also a deeper sense of belonging to their cultural heritage. A final observation at MAN 1 Ternate illustrates this clearly: after reading Voices from the

Islands, based on oral narratives from Halmahera, students discussed the importance of protecting the sea and its ecosystems, not as an abstract academic topic but as a moral responsibility toward their community.

From a theoretical standpoint, the CSCRF contributes significantly to contemporary critical literacy scholarship by integrating social, cultural, and reflective dimensions into EFL reading pedagogy. While Barber and Klauda (2020) emphasize the relationship between power and identity, this framework extends their conceptualization by incorporating local cultural mediation as an epistemic foundation for critical learning in multicultural settings. Practically, it offers a new direction for English language education in Indonesia, suggesting that literacy pedagogy need not conform to homogenized global norms but can instead be grounded in the rich and diverse local contexts of learners.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that local culture–based literacy instruction fundamentally reconstructs how students in EFL contexts, particularly in Ternate, understand, interpret, and reflect upon texts. The integration of cultural narratives such as the Sultanate of Ternate's histories, maritime legends, and coastal oral traditions fosters more dialogic, contextual, and reflective reading practices. Reading thus evolves from literal comprehension to a social act of negotiating values, identities, and moralities. In this process, local culture functions as both a cognitive and affective mediator that enriches students' critical awareness of texts and social realities. Through dialogic classroom engagement, students develop not only inferential and argumentative capacities but also self-awareness as culturally grounded readers. These findings affirm that effective critical literacy must be rooted in the sociocultural contexts in which learners live and must involve a pedagogical shift from textual analysis toward the interconnection of language, culture, and identity. From this perspective, the Culturally Situated Critical Reading Framework emerges as a conceptual model situating reading as a socially mediated act that bridges cognition, culture, and critical reflection. The framework not only enriches critical literacy theory in multilingual contexts but also provides a pathway toward more contextually relevant, inclusive, and culturally just English pedagogy in Indonesia.

ETHICAL STATEMENT AND DISCLOSURE

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles, including informed consent, protection of informants' confidentiality, and respect for local cultural values. Special consideration was given to participants from vulnerable groups to ensure their safety, comfort, and equal rights to participate. No external funding was received, and the authors declare no conflict of interest. All data and information presented were collected through valid research methods and have been verified to ensure their accuracy and reliability. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) was limited to technical assistance for writing and language editing, without influencing the scientific substance of the work. The authors express their gratitude to the informants for their valuable insights, and to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback on an earlier version of this manuscript. The authors

take full responsibility for the content and conclusions of this article.

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