



Integrating Local Culture-Based Learning Media in Multilingual Classrooms: An Analytical Study of Implementation and Educational Impact

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Abstract

This study investigates the implementation of local culture-based learning media, specifically grounded in Toraja culture, within multilingual English classrooms at Universitas Kristen Indonesia Toraja. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through classroom observations, document analysis, and in-depth interviews with English lecturers who actively integrate Torajan cultural elements—such as traditional narratives, rituals, and symbolism—into English language instruction. The findings reveal that such integration fosters culturally responsive instructional strategies, enhances student engagement, supports linguistic and intercultural competence, and affirms learners' cultural identities. Lesson materials and teaching practices proved a successful bridging of content knowledge and cultural relevance, making English learning more accessible and meaningful. While the approach yielded clear pedagogical benefits, it also highlighted challenges, including limited access to culturally adapted materials and the need for institutional support. The study concludes that with proper structural backing, the integration of local cultural media has transformative potential for inclusive, identity-affirming language education in multilingual contexts.

Keywords: *Culturally responsive pedagogy; Toraja culture; multilingual classrooms; local learning media; English language teaching*



1. Introduction

In contemporary higher education, especially within regions rich in cultural diversity, educators are increasingly challenged to create inclusive, meaningful, and contextually relevant learning environments. One promising pedagogical approach to addressing the complexities of multilingual classrooms is the integration of culture-based learning media that reflects local culture. These media refer to instructional tools—ranging from texts, visual aids, digital resources, and storytelling content—that are deliberately embedded with cultural elements drawn from the local context (Arief, 2024; Hidayah et al., 2024; Lara Velarde & Leech Morejon, 2025). When these tools incorporate traditional symbols, local wisdom, customary expressions, and region-specific narratives, they do more than convey linguistic information; they create a culturally resonant learning experience (Patlan, 2024). Such resources help bridge linguistic and conceptual gaps by offering students familiar reference points, making abstract or foreign language concepts more tangible and accessible.

Moreover, local culture-based learning media foster a deeper emotional and cognitive connection between students and the learning material (Bustomi et al., 2025). When learners meet content that reflects their own cultural heritage, values, or communal practices, their sense of identity is affirmed, and their motivation to engage increases (Stein et al., 2024). This alignment between instructional content and students' lived experiences has been shown to enhance comprehension, retention, and critical thinking (Benjamin-Raymore, 2023). In multilingual contexts, where students often navigate multiple linguistic codes and cultural frameworks simultaneously, culturally grounded media function as a unifying bridge—allowing students to access new linguistic knowledge through the lens of cultural familiarity (Benjamin-Raymore, 2023). Therefore, this approach not only promotes effective language acquisition but also contributes to the preservation and appreciation of local culture within formal education.

Multilingual classrooms—characterized by the presence of learners from diverse linguistic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds—pose unique pedagogical challenges that cannot be addressed through conventional, monolingual, or culturally neutral

instructional methods (Makalela, 2018). In such environments, students bring with them a wide range of prior knowledge, language skills, and cultural frameworks, which influence how they interpret, engage with, and retain new information. Traditional “one-size-fits-all” approaches often do not accommodate this diversity, resulting in disengagement, reduced comprehension, and marginalization of learners whose linguistic or cultural identities are underrepresented in mainstream educational content.

To meet these challenges, integrating local cultural elements into learning media has emerged as a responsive and transformative strategy. This approach contextualizes language learning by embedding instructional content within the cultural realities of the learners. For instance, using culturally relevant themes, local narratives, traditional symbols, or community-based examples enables students to anchor new language skills in familiar concepts, thereby enhancing both understanding and retention (Fitrianto & Farisi, 2025). It also promotes inclusivity by confirming the cultural identities of learners, which is crucial for fostering a sense of belonging and motivation in diverse classrooms.

In this context, local culture functions not as a decorative or supplemental element but as a core part of the learning process (Li, 2022). It shapes the design of instructional materials, informs the selection of topics, and influences classroom interaction patterns (Oleson & Hora, 2014). Rather than being treated as background context, cultural knowledge is foregrounded and used as a pedagogical resource (Dyches & Boyd, 2017). This cultural centrality transforms the classroom into a space of both linguistic and cultural negotiation, where students learn not only a new language but also how to position their own identities within broader social and intercultural landscapes (Hatoss, 2019). Thus, culturally embedded media serve a dual purpose: they support language acquisition while simultaneously reinforcing cultural pride and community cohesion.

Preliminary observations at the English Education Study Program of Universitas Kristen Indonesia Toraja revealed an emerging practice among English lecturers: the adaptation of Toraja cultural elements into English language teaching. Lecturers responsible for English courses have begun integrating aspects of Torajan traditions,

symbols, rituals, and philosophies into classroom materials and activities. This approach is designed not only to make language instruction more relatable but also to foster intercultural competence and pride in local identity among students.

This study focuses on English lecturers in the English Education Study Program at Universitas Kristen Indonesia Toraja who are actively engaged in integrating Toraja culture-based media into their multilingual classrooms. These educators show pedagogical innovation by embedding elements of local cultural knowledge—such as traditional values, oral histories, rituals, and symbolic practices—into English language instruction. Their integration efforts are clear in the design of lesson plans, vocabulary choice, thematic units, and interactive communication tasks that draw directly from Toraja cultural contexts.

Through these culturally grounded approaches, the lecturers enhance the relevance and accessibility of language learning for students from diverse linguistic backgrounds. By connecting language instruction to familiar cultural references, they foster deeper engagement, improve comprehension, and support the development of both linguistic and intercultural competencies. This practice not only contributes to more effective language acquisition but also strengthens students' cultural identity and appreciation for local wisdom. The insights drawn from their teaching practices underscore the transformative potential of culturally responsive pedagogy in multilingual education settings.

This study, therefore, looks to explore how local culture-based learning media—specifically grounded in Toraja culture—are integrated into multilingual classroom contexts and to assess the educational impacts of such integration. It examines both the methods of implementation, and the outcomes observed in student engagement, comprehension, and cultural identity formation.

2. Methods

Design and Samples

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to explore the integration of local culture-based learning media—specifically Toraja cultural elements—within multilingual classrooms in a higher education setting (Creswell, 2021). The case

study method was chosen to enable an in-depth understanding of the practices, perspectives, and pedagogical strategies used by English lecturers in adapting local cultural content for language instruction. A qualitative approach allowed the researcher to capture nuanced insights into the educational impact of these practices on student engagement, comprehension, and identity formation.

The research was conducted at the English Education Study Program of Universitas Kristen Indonesia Toraja, an institution embedded within a rich cultural context and characterized by linguistic diversity among its student population. The participants consisted of English language lecturers who are actively implementing or experimenting with Toraja culture-based media in their teaching. These educators were purposefully selected based on their involvement in curriculum development, lesson planning, and classroom implementation that incorporate local cultural materials and themes (Campbell et al., 2020).

To ensure rich and triangulated data, the study used multiple data collection methods: Classroom Observations were conducted to document the implementation of local culture-based media in real-time teaching contexts (Bernstein & Lysniak, 2017). These observations focused on instructional strategies, use of culturally embedded materials, student responses, and classroom interactions. In-depth Interviews were held with participating lecturers to gain insights into their motivations, planning processes, instructional goals, perceived challenges, and reflections on the impact of integrating local culture into English language instruction.

Data Collection

The data collection process was carried out in three stages. First, preliminary coordination with the English Education Study Program was conducted to obtain institutional permission and identify lecturers who met the selection criteria. Second, classroom observations were scheduled and implemented across different courses where Toraja cultural elements were integrated. Each observation lasted between 60–90 minutes, and detailed field notes were taken to capture instructional activities, media usage, and student engagement. Third, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participating lecturers after the observation sessions. The interviews, lasting approximately 45–60 minutes each, were audio-recorded with

participants’ consent and later transcribed verbatim. This sequential procedure allowed the researcher to directly connect classroom practices with lecturers’ reflections, thereby enhancing the validity of the data.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, allowing the researcher to find recurring patterns and meaningful categories related to the integration of cultural content (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Transcripts from interviews and observation notes were coded and grouped into key themes, including instructional strategies, cultural adaptation, student engagement, and educational outcomes.

3. Results and Discussions

Thematic analysis of interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis revealed four key themes: (1) Culturally Responsive Instructional Strategies, (2) Adaptation of Local Cultural Content into Media, and (3) Student Engagement and Comprehension. Interview excerpts are used throughout to highlight the perspectives of participating lecturers and offer deeper insight into observed practices. Pseudonyms have been used to support participant confidentiality.

The table below presents a thematic matrix summarizing the key findings from this study on the integration of Toraja culture-based media in multilingual English classrooms. Each theme is drawn from interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, highlighting the pedagogical strategies, implementation practices, student responses, and challenges met by lecturers. This matrix serves to clarify the connections between evidence and the broader educational implications of culturally responsive teaching in linguistically diverse learning environments.

Table1. Thematic Matrix: Integration of Toraja Culture-Based Media in Multilingual Classrooms

Theme	Description	Data Source	Sample Interview Quote	Observation / Document Evidence
Culturally Responsive Instructional Strategies	Use of culturally relevant prompts and themes to activate students’ background knowledge and encourage participation.	Interview with Ms. Lina	“I always begin my lesson with something familiar—like asking about a traditional ceremony or Toraja food.”	Observed warm-up discussions on <i>Rambu Solo</i> and tongkonan; students responded with personal stories.

Theme	Description	Data Source	Sample Interview Quote	Observation / Document Evidence
Adaptation of Local Cultural Content into Media	Incorporation of traditional stories, rituals, and symbols into teaching materials such as reading texts, visual slides, and writing prompts.	Interview with Mr. Andi	"We are trying to incorporate traditional narratives, like the legend of Pong Tiku, into reading texts."	Lesson plans included texts on <i>Tedong Bonga</i> and local customs, with vocabulary activities and comprehension tasks.
Student Engagement, Identity, and Comprehension	Cultural relevance boosted student confidence, interaction, and emotional connection; also reinforced identity.	Interview with Ms. Rini and Mr. Berto	"Even those who are usually shy start participating..." (Rini); "Students say they feel more valued..." (Berto)	Students actively engaged in describing <i>Tongkonan</i> in descriptive tasks; journal entries reflected pride in culture.

3.1. Culturally Responsive Instructional Strategies

Lecturers adopted a range of strategies to embed Toraja cultural knowledge into English language learning. Interview data showed that educators intentionally selected culturally relevant themes to activate students’ background knowledge and foster deeper engagement. “I always begin my lesson with something familiar—like asking about a traditional ceremony or Toraja food. It helps the students relax and makes the lesson feel relevant,” explained Ms. Lina, who teaches Reading and Speaking courses.

Ms. Lina’s instructional strategy of beginning lessons with familiar cultural references is supported by constructivist learning theory, which posits that students learn more effectively when new information is connected to existing knowledge and experiences (Prosser & Sze, 2014). By referencing traditional ceremonies or local foods—topics that students are personally connected to—she reduces affective barriers and creates a low-anxiety environment conducive to language learning. This approach not only fosters emotional safety and cultural affirmation but also aligns with principles of schema theory, which emphasizes the importance of activating prior knowledge to facilitate comprehension and retention (Hattan et al., 2024). In multilingual classrooms, where learners may feel linguistically or

culturally marginalized, grounding instruction in shared cultural content enhances inclusivity and engagement.

This finding was further substantiated by classroom observations, where instructors consistently employed culturally anchored prompts to start learning activities. For example, in one observed session, a lecturer began the lesson by asking students to “Describe your family’s experience during a *Rambu Solo*’ [funeral ritual].” In another, the teacher introduced a comparative writing exercise with the prompt “Compare the architecture of a *Tongkonan* [Torajan traditional house] to a modern house.” These culturally resonant activities not only activated students’ prior knowledge but also encouraged authentic use of the English language in contextually meaningful ways. Students proved increased confidence and fluency as they drew from personal and communal experiences to construct their responses. These interactions often led to spontaneous discussions, peer sharing, and follow-up questions, indicating heightened engagement, deeper comprehension, and a stronger emotional connection to the learning material.

3.2. Adaptation of Local Cultural Content into Learning Media

Participants skillfully adapted Toraja-specific content into various learning materials. Interview responses showed that these adaptations reflected both pedagogical intention and a desire to preserve local identity. “We are trying to incorporate traditional narratives, like the legend of *Pong Tiku*, into reading texts. This way, students not only learn vocabulary and grammar but also understand our cultural heritage in English,” shared Mr. Andi, who develops course modules for intermediate writing.

Mr. Andi’s approach reflects a powerful intersection of language education and cultural preservation. By incorporating traditional narratives such as the legend of *Pong Tiku* into English reading texts, he engages in what Zaidi and El Chaar (2022) refers to as “identity texts”—instructional materials that allow students to see their cultural identities represented and valued within academic discourse. This strategy not only promotes language development—enhancing vocabulary acquisition, grammatical structure recognition, and reading comprehension—but also affirms

students' sociocultural backgrounds, making the learning process more meaningful and motivating.

Moreover, narrative-based learning is widely supported in educational research as an effective medium for contextualizing abstract linguistic concepts (Pico et al., 2021). Traditional stories provide coherent structures, emotional resonance, and familiar themes, all of which support deeper cognitive engagement. In multilingual classrooms, using Indigenous narratives like that of *pong tiku* helps students navigate a second language through the lens of their cultural understanding, reducing cognitive overload and reinforcing both linguistic and cultural fluency. This practice not only aids in achieving linguistic goals but also aligns with culturally responsive teaching principles that promote equity, relevance, and student agency (Wagner, 2025).

Mr. Andi's integration of traditional narratives such as the legend of Pong Tiku into reading materials reflects a culturally sustaining pedagogical approach that affirms students' identities while advancing academic literacy (Wagner, 2024). Embedding local stories into English instruction provides dual benefits: it enhances language skills—such as vocabulary acquisition, grammar awareness, and reading comprehension—while simultaneously transmitting cultural knowledge and values. This practice aligns with the view that literacy is not a neutral skill but a culturally situated act (Maine et al., 2019). By framing English learning within the context of Indigenous narratives, students engage with content that is both cognitively and culturally meaningful, fostering deeper understanding, critical thinking, and a sense of ownership over their learning.

Lesson plans and instructional media reviewed during the study confirmed the intentional integration of Toraja cultural content into English language instruction. In one example, a reading activity included a richly descriptive passage detailing the sequence and symbolic meaning of a *Rambu Solo'* [funeral ritual] procession. The text was supplemented with targeted vocabulary lists—featuring culturally specific terms such as *Tedong* [Buffalo], *Ma'pasilaga Tedong* [Buffalo fighting contest], and *Tongkonan* [Torajan traditional house]—and guided comprehension questions that required students to find main ideas, infer cultural values, and make cross-

cultural comparisons. Beyond reading tasks, students were assigned follow-up projects that called for higher-order thinking and communicative output, such as preparing multimedia presentations or composing narrative essays on culturally embedded topics like *Tedong Bonga* [Ceremonial Buffalo], Torajan wedding customs, or ancestral rituals. These assignments encouraged learners to draw from their own cultural backgrounds while practicing language structures, narrative coherence, and academic writing conventions. Through this process, the curriculum successfully bridged linguistic goals with culturally situated knowledge, allowing students to see English not as a foreign imposition but as a meaningful medium for expressing local identity.

3.3. Student Engagement, Identity, and Comprehension

The integration of local cultural content significantly enhanced student engagement and comprehension. Lecturers observed that students became more eager to contribute when class content resonated with their lived experiences. “Students are more talkative when the topic relates to their culture. Even those who are usually shy start taking part when I ask about traditional clothing or ceremonies,” said Ms. Rini, a lecturer in Academic Speaking.

Ms. Rini’s observation underscores a core tenet of culturally responsive pedagogy: when instructional content reflects students’ cultural backgrounds, their engagement, confidence, and participation significantly increase. This aligns with Krashen’s affective filter hypothesis (Hui & Lin, 2008), which posits that learners acquire language more effectively when they are emotionally comfortable and personally connected to the material. By introducing culturally familiar topics—such as traditional clothing or ceremonies—Ms. Rini lowers students’ affective filters, reducing anxiety and creating a psychologically safe space for communication.

Observation data further revealed that students appeared more focused and confident during tasks involving familiar cultural references. For instance, during a lesson on descriptive language, students enthusiastically described elements of *Tongkonan* [torajan traditional house] architecture, displaying both linguistic creativity and cultural insight. Moreover, this approach contributed to identity

affirmation. “It’s not just about learning English—it’s about building pride. Students say they feel more valued when their culture is part of the class,” added Mr. Berto, who has incorporated cultural reflection journals into his assignments.

Mr. Berto’s statement highlights the deep interconnection between language learning, identity affirmation, and emotional engagement. His integration of cultural reflection journals into English instruction embodies the principles of culturally sustaining pedagogy, which goes beyond inclusion to promote cultural pride and agency actively (De et al., 2020). When students see their cultural values, stories, and practices acknowledged in classroom activities, they are not merely learning a language—they are positioning themselves as legitimate contributors within the educational process.

This practice also resonates with Deci and Ryan’s Self-Determination Theory (Van Lange et al., 2011), which emphasizes the importance of relatedness and autonomy in fostering intrinsic motivation. By inviting students to reflect on their own heritage through language tasks, Mr. Berto creates meaningful opportunities for self-expression and personal relevance, which in turn enhance motivation, effort, and persistence in learning. Additionally, such reflective practices strengthen metacognitive awareness and intercultural sensitivity, both of which are essential in multilingual education settings (Jessner & Allgäuer-Hackl, 2022).

In this context, cultural reflection journals do more than assess writing skills—they function as dialogic tools for identity construction and validation. This contributes not only to linguistic development but also to a broader educational goal: cultivating empowered, culturally grounded communicators.

This observation aligns with a substantial body of literature emphasizing that culturally responsive pedagogy fosters not only academic achievement but also emotional and intercultural development. When students meet learning environments that reflect and respect their cultural backgrounds, they are more likely to experience a sense of belonging, validation, and personal investment in their education (Pendergast et al., 2018). This emotional engagement strengthens their willingness to participate, take intellectual risks, and persist through linguistic or

cognitive challenges—factors that are especially crucial in multilingual classrooms where learners may face identity negotiation or marginalization.

Moreover, by centering diverse cultural perspectives in the curriculum, culturally responsive pedagogy provides students with the tools to navigate and appreciate cultural differences, thereby enhancing their intercultural competence. According to Barrett and Borghetti (2025), intercultural competence involves not only linguistic skills but also the ability to interpret and relate cultural meanings, reflect critically on one's own and others' values, and interact appropriately in cross-cultural contexts. Pedagogical practices that foreground local wisdom, traditions, and community narratives—such as those described in this study—lay the groundwork for this kind of holistic, culturally rooted language learning.

This study offers compelling evidence of the pedagogical advantages of embedding Toraja culture-based media into English language instruction within multilingual learning environments. By incorporating local cultural narratives, practices, and symbols into lesson plans and learning materials, educators successfully made instruction more relevant and accessible to students with diverse linguistic backgrounds. This culturally grounded approach led to higher levels of student engagement, improved language comprehension, and increased confidence in classroom participation. More importantly, it contributed to a more profound sense of identity affirmation, as students recognized their own heritage reflected in the content and structure of their learning experiences.

These outcomes are consistent with the broader literature on culturally responsive pedagogy, which emphasizes the importance of aligning teaching practices with the sociocultural realities of learners (Meng, 2023; Shonfeld et al., 2021; Wilhelm et al., 2019). However, this study adds a distinct contribution by illustrating how such pedagogical principles can be localized within the unique context of Torajan culture. It proves how traditional values, community histories, and Indigenous knowledge systems can enrich language learning not merely as illustrative content, but as foundational elements of instructional design.

Despite its promise, the long-term sustainability of this approach hinges on structural and institutional support. Lecturers found challenges related to aligning culturally adapted materials with national curriculum standards, limited access to contextually relevant resources, and a lack of formal training on integrating cultural content pedagogically. Therefore, meaningful and lasting implementation will require targeted investments in professional development, the co-creation of teaching materials with cultural experts, and curricular flexibility that accommodates local variation without compromising academic rigor.

When adequately supported, the integration of local culture-based learning media can play a transformative role in higher education—not only by advancing English language proficiency but also by fostering community-rooted, inclusive pedagogical models that respect and revitalize indigenous identities in an increasingly globalized academic landscape.

4. Conclusion

This study has explored the integration of Toraja culture-based learning media in multilingual English classrooms at Universitas Kristen Indonesia Toraja. Through classroom observations, document analysis, and in-depth interviews with lecturers, the findings reveal that embedding local cultural content in English language instruction leads to increased student engagement, improved comprehension, and strengthened cultural identity. Educators proved pedagogical innovation by adapting traditional narratives, rituals, and symbols into lesson plans, multimedia resources, and classroom discussions—effectively bridging linguistic instruction with students' cultural contexts.

The use of culture-based media served not only as a tool for language acquisition but also as a vehicle for intercultural competence and identity affirmation. Students responded positively when their own heritage was acknowledged and valued in classroom practices, reflecting the powerful role of culturally responsive teaching in multilingual settings.

However, this study also found practical challenges, such as limited access to culturally adapted materials, a lack of training in culturally responsive pedagogy,

and tension between institutional requirements and localized teaching innovations. Despite these challenges, the lecturers' willingness to engage with and adapt local wisdom into formal education points to a valuable and sustainable direction for curriculum development.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders have no involvement in any of the stages related to this study, including study design, data collection, analysis, result interpretation, article preparation, or publication.

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