# From Vocabulary Building to Cultural Literacy: Implementing Contextual Teaching and Learning in Resource-Limited EFL Classrooms

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# ARTICLE INFO ABSTRACT

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**Keywords:** Contextual Teaching and Learning; Cultural Literacy; Local Wisdom; Vocabulary Development This study aims to explore the implementation of the Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) approach in teaching English in resource-constrained classrooms, with a focus on vocabulary development and cultural literacy. Using a multiple case study design with a qualitative approach, data was collected through semi-structured interviews with three lecturers at two educational institutions in West Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. The findings show that the use of materials based on local wisdom, such as folklore and community history, significantly improves vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, and student motivation. In addition, CTL based on local contexts strengthens students' connections with teaching materials, enriches cultural literacy, and builds enthusiasm for learning. Despite resource limitations such as lack of access to technology and English language references, lecturers showed creativity in developing contextual teaching materials. This study contributes to filling the literature gap on local context-based language learning in a confined environment, as well as recommending the need for further research that expands population coverage and examines the long-term impact of the use of local materials in EFL teaching.

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#### INTRODUCTION

In learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), vocabulary mastery is a fundamental component that determines the success of reading comprehension and overall language skills. For beginner learners, vocabulary limitations are often the main obstacle in understanding authentic texts and in communicating meaningfully (Isma et al., 2023; Nation, 2022; Schmitt, 2008). This challenge is increasingly complex for students in resource-poor areas, such as rural areas, where access to quality teaching materials, technology, and an English-speaking environment is very limited.

On the other hand, cultural literacy as an important part of language competence has received wide attention in the realm of language teaching. Cultural literacy refers to the ability to understand and appreciate both local and global cultural contexts in the process of learning a language (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999; Kramsch, 1993). The integration of cultural content in learning not only increases student motivation and engagement but also helps students build a more contextual and life-relevant understanding of the language. However, most research has still focused on global culture or native English-speaking cultures, and not many have explored the potential of local cultural narratives such as folklore, tradition, or community history as teaching materials in the context of EFL, particularly in disadvantaged areas.

The Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) approach emerged as a promising pedagogical framework to address these challenges. Rooted in constructivist theory, CTL emphasizes the importance of interconnectedness between learning materials and students' real lives, active engagement, collaboration, and reflection (Johnson, 2002). In the context of EFL, this approach allows teachers to build learning experiences that are linguistically relevant as well as socially and culturally meaningful. Although the concept of CTL has

been widely discussed theoretically, empirical studies that explore its implementation in resource-constrained classrooms, especially in remote areas of Southeast Asia, are still very limited.

In Indonesia, the gap in education quality between urban and rural areas is still a serious problem. In many regions such as in the eastern part of Indonesia, English learning faces a double challenge: limited educational infrastructure and the very diverse basic abilities of students. Nevertheless, many educators in these regions are showing remarkable creativity by leveraging local wisdom and contextual teaching strategies to bridge learning gaps even as they face challenges.

This research aims to fill this gap by exploring the implementation of Contextual Teaching and Learning in English learning in classrooms with limited resources, focusing on vocabulary development and cultural literacy. This study examines how local texts such as folklore and community history are used to strengthen reading and vocabulary skills, as well as how these approaches shape the cultural awareness of prospective teachers. This research also describes the pedagogical strategies applied by lecturers in overcoming the challenges of limited facilities, technology, and student learning motivation. Thus, this study is expected to contribute to a language learning literature that is contextual and responsive to local conditions, especially in resource-constrained areas.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

## Vocabulary Acquisition in the Context of EFL

Vocabulary acquisition is widely recognized as a foundational aspect of EFL learning, playing a crucial role in students' reading comprehension and overall language proficiency. Nation (2001) argues that both breadth (the number of known words) and depth (how well the words are understood and used) are essential for effective vocabulary learning. This distinction is supported by Schmitt (2008), who stresses the importance of combining explicit instruction with context-based learning strategies. While these studies offer foundational insights, they tend to approach vocabulary acquisition from a universal perspective and rarely address the contextual constraints found in under-resourced learning environments.

Laufer and Goldstein (2004) suggest that dual strategies, explicit teaching and inferencing through context, enhance retention and flexible use of vocabulary. However, this duality presumes access to rich input and teacher training, which may not be feasible in rural EFL classrooms. More recent studies have called for adaptive vocabulary teaching models tailored to students' immediate sociolinguistic environment (Boers, 2021; Nation, 2017). This study positions itself within that evolving discourse by exploring how locally grounded materials, despite resource limitations, can still foster significant lexical development through contextual engagement and repetitive exposure to high-frequency, culturally relevant vocabulary.

# **Cultural Literacy and Local Wisdom in EFL Materials**

The role of cultural literacy in EFL instruction has long been acknowledged, yet much of the literature emphasizes global or Anglophone cultural exposure. Kramsch (1993) conceptualizes language as inseparable from culture, urging educators to include cultural perspectives in language teaching. However, such frameworks often marginalize local knowledge systems. In contrast, Tomlinson (2011) and Cortazzi & Jin (1999) advocate the inclusion of culturally familiar content to enhance engagement and identity formation.

Despite these recommendations, there remains limited critical engagement on how local cultural narratives, such as folklore or community history, function pedagogically in EFL contexts. As Alptekin (2002) argues, exposing students exclusively to native-speaker norms in language teaching can be both irrelevant and demotivating. Using local cultural content, therefore, not only enhances authenticity but also aligns with a critical pedagogy that centers learner identity and experience. This study contributes to that conversation by showing how local materials can serve as both linguistic and cultural resources, especially in contexts where English is perceived as distant from students' realities.

### Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) in Language Education

The CTL framework, grounded in constructivist learning theory, emphasizes the meaningful integration of students' real-life experiences with classroom instruction (Johnson, 2002). While Johnson and others describe CTL as a universally applicable strategy, its impact varies significantly across cultural and resource contexts. Berns and Erickson (2001) highlight its potential in marginalized educational settings due to its reliance on local knowledge and community engagement. However, more critical perspectives question whether CTL can maintain rigor and depth in the absence of supporting infrastructure (Nguyen, 2011).

This study engages with these tensions by examining how CTL principles, particularly relevance, reflection, and student autonomy, can be operationalized through low-cost, locally tailored resources. It challenges the assumption that effective CTL implementation requires digital integration, suggesting instead that authenticity and contextual grounding are more pivotal than technology alone. Furthermore, the findings support the idea that when CTL incorporates local cultural elements, it fosters not just language competence but also social and emotional engagement.

### Challenges and Strategies in Resource-Constrained EFL Classes

Much of the literature on EFL pedagogy assumes the availability of standard resources such as digital tools, access to books, or trained instructors (Isma et al., 2024; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Yet, in rural and remote contexts, these conditions are often absent. Tali Tal (2004) and Borthwick & Dickens (2013) suggest that a community-based approach and the use of locally-sourced materials can compensate for systemic gaps. However, these solutions are typically discussed descriptively rather than analyzed critically in relation to learner outcomes.

This study adds nuance by showing that contextually grounded improvisation, such as translating folklore or incorporating oral traditions, can be a source of pedagogical innovation. Teachers act not merely as content deliverers but as adaptive material designers. This aligns with findings from Hanauer (2005), who emphasizes the agency of educators in multilingual and under-resourced settings, underscoring the importance of ecological perspectives in language planning and classroom practice.

#### **METHODS**

## Research Design

This study uses a qualitative approach with multiple case study design which is adapted from the case study design framework developed by Creswell and Poth (2018), Lapan et al. (2012), Merriam (2009), and Yin (2014). This approach was chosen to allow for an in-depth understanding of contextually based English teaching experiences and practices in two different educational institutions.

#### **Participants**

The respondents in this study consisted of three lecturers who taught English at two different institutions, namely STKIP Paracendia NW Sumbawa and STKIP Yapis Dompu. The selection of participants was based on purposive sampling, with two main criteria: (1) having at least four years of experience in teaching English, and (2) being actively involved in implementing contextual and local wisdom-based materials in their classroom practices. These criteria were considered essential to ensure that the participants had sufficient pedagogical experience and insight into the use of Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) in resource-limited environments.

- 1. Jamal: A lecturer from Sumbawa who has been teaching English for about five years. He has experience in applying contextual-based materials in English teaching.
- 2. Kireina: A lecturer from Dompu who has also taught English for more than five years. Diana regularly integrates local culture in her English teaching.
- 3. Rama: A senior lecturer from Dompu who has a long experience teaching English. Rusdin is known as an experienced teacher in various approaches to teaching English.

# **Data Collection Instruments**

Data collection in this study used semi-structured interview guidelines, which were validated by two professors in the field of English language education. Both validators are senior academics with extensive expertise in English language teaching, curriculum development, and qualitative research. The interview instrument was designed to explore the experiences, perspectives, and teaching practices applied by lecturers related to the use of contextual-based materials in English language learning. The validation process ensured that the interview questions were conceptually relevant, clearly formulated, and aligned with the research objectives. Suggestions from the validators were used to refine the wording, structure, and focus of the questions.

## **Research Procedure**

Before conducting the interview, the researcher conducted a preliminary study to gain a better understanding of the context and background of teaching in the two institutions studied. After that, the

researcher asked permission from the three lecturers involved to become respondents in this study. After obtaining consent from the respondents, the researcher proceeded with the interview process conducted over the phone to ensure that the data could be recorded clearly and adequately. The interview process is carried out in a structured manner, following pre-arranged guidelines.

### **Data Analysis**

In analyzing the collected data, this study uses thematic analysis adapted from the model developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis process is carried out in several stages, namely: first, reading the interview transcript repeatedly to gain a deeper understanding; second, to do coding to identify the initial themes; third, group the codes into relevant categories; fourth, to conduct a themeization to formulate the main themes that emerge from the data; and fifth, compile a report based on the findings that have been analyzed. In addition, the study also utilizes Atlas.ti software to assist in the process of coding, grouping, and thematizing data, in order to improve efficiency and accuracy in analysis.

#### **FINDINGS**

## **Vocabulary Building through Contextualized Reading Materials**

The findings of this study indicate that the use of local wisdom-based materials effectively supports vocabulary improvement in English learning in the context of limited resources. Rama explained that "apart from their reading comprehension, they also experienced an increase in their vocabulary comprehension because they thought that the language used in the material was quite simple and easy to understand." This statement affirms that the simplicity of language in locally based materials makes it easier for students to access the meanings of new words and accelerate their lexical growth. In addition, Rama also added that "reading learners using local wisdom-based materials or their environment are quite good at improving their vocabulary," showing the important role of contextual relevance in the vocabulary acquisition process.

Support for the importance of an explicit focus on vocabulary was also conveyed by Kireina who stated, "I focus on vocabulary first. This means that when I ask them to read, they automatically search for physical words that are appropriate to use." This approach illustrates that before developing a comprehensive understanding of the text, students are directed to identify key vocabulary, a strategy that is in line with the principles of form-focused instruction in second language acquisition. The initial focus on physical vocabulary also helps students develop more strategic and targeted reading skills.

Meanwhile, the integration between reading activities and language production was emphasized by Jamal. He mentioned that "their vocabulary is increasing... They recorded the core of the reading and sent it to me. So it's a mandatory task every week." Through this activity, students not only increase their vocabulary, but also improve their pronunciation and speaking fluency, as he emphasized, "in terms of vocabulary they are increasing, pronunciation and all sorts of things are increasing." Task-based approaches like this provide space for students to actively internalize new vocabulary through ongoing practice.

# **Cultural Literacy through Local Wisdom-Based Materials**

The findings of this study show that the integration of materials based on local wisdom in English learning has a positive impact on students' intersest and reading comprehension. Rama stated that "reading materials based on local wisdom are still considered good... especially since these materials can generally be found in their area," indicating that exposure to local cultural narratives provides a fresh and meaningful learning experience for students. Furthermore, Rama added that "they stated that the materials based on local culture were interesting and they were happy," which showed that the emotional interest in the teaching materials also encouraged active involvement in the learning process.

Kireina also underlined the importance of cultural aspects in increasing learning drive. He revealed that "the motivation of students to get to know folklore better is very, very high... Moreover, they are prospective teachers. Oh I just found out that there are stories like this... It's quite up, especially in the narrative text part." This shows that the introduction to folklore not only enriches linguistic competence, but also broadens the cultural horizons of students, especially those who will play the role of educators in the future.

In line with that, Jamal emphasized the importance of matching the material with the interests of students. He explains that "my students are very motivated because they are learning material that they enjoy... In addition, this approach is very helpful for students in understanding reading because the material is based on their choices and preferences." These findings suggest that the personalization of local culture-based teaching

materials is able to build a personal connection between students and texts, strengthening cognitive and affective engagement that is essential in the development of *cultural literacy*.

## Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) to Enhance EFL Learning

The findings of this study show that the application of the Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) approach in English language learning makes a major contribution to increasing student engagement and enthusiasm. Rama explained that "this CTL approach has received praise from most students... They feel interested and motivated to seek out more information... relevant to the situation in our area," which indicates that the connection between teaching materials and real context encourages curiosity and strengthens the relevance of learning to students' daily lives. Thus, CTL not only builds academic understanding, but also expands real-world connections in the learning process.

Kireina also highlighted the effectiveness of CTL in developing various aspects of language skills. He stated that "the CTL approach using local culture-based materials has a great influence on students' motivation, vocabulary, and reading comprehension," showing that the integration of local context into teaching materials is able to create a more meaningful learning experience, while enriching students' language skills in both cognitive and affective dimensions.

In line with these findings, Jamal emphasized that the selection of materials based on student preferences is a key factor in the success of this approach. He said that "as far as I can observe that this CTL is quite effective for English language learning... Because the material is based on their preferences and preferences so they are very enthusiastic about understanding the text they have chosen." These findings underscore that a contextual and interest-based CTL approach can increase learning enthusiasm, build independence, and strengthen student engagement in foreign language learning in resource-limited environments.

#### Resource-Limited EFL Classroom

The findings of this study confirm that resource limitations are a major challenge in the implementation of English language learning in the local context. Rama highlighted that "the most difficult challenge to be honest here is the facilities... They don't have laptops or mobile phones... very lacking," which shows that the lack of access to technological tools directly has an impact on the limitations of the learning methods and media that can be used. This condition emphasizes the urgency of innovative and adaptive strategies in managing classes in a limited environment.

Kireina added that the challenge lies not only in physical means, but also in the availability of relevant teaching materials. He revealed that "I personally translate folklore because there is no special book about the Dompu and Bima culture in English... references are severely lacking," indicating that extra efforts from educators to provide local culture-based materials are an important aspect in bridging the gap in contextual and target language learning resources.

In line with that, Jamal emphasized that "the toughest challenge in my opinion is finding material that fits the local and English-speaking context, it's still very limited in supply." This shows that the development of teaching materials that are relevant to the socio-cultural background of students is an urgent need in the context of resource-based learning. These findings highlight that the creativity, perseverance, and commitment of lecturers are the main keys to ensuring the continuity of effective learning even in sub-optimal conditions.

### **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study indicate that the use of local wisdom-based materials in English learning effectively contributes to the development of students' vocabulary in the context of limited resources. As Rama expressed, the use of simple and familiar language in local materials facilitates vocabulary acquisition, making it easier for students to internalize new lexical items. This aligns with the CTL principle of relating learning to students' prior experiences and real-life contexts (Johnson, 2002), which helps create meaningful learning and improves retention. The simplicity and contextual relevance of the materials help reduce cognitive load, allowing learners to focus on form and meaning simultaneously.

Furthermore, as noted by Kireina, the emphasis on identifying key vocabulary within meaningful texts reflects the CTL element of "applying" and "constructing" knowledge, in which learners are encouraged to use language purposefully. This process is also in line with the principle of form-focused instruction in SLA (Loewen, 2020), indicating that CTL not only fosters engagement but also supports structured linguistic development. The task-based component reported by Jamal, requiring students to record and reflect on their

weekly reading, represents another CTL principle, namely "doing" and "reflecting", which emphasizes active participation and metacognitive growth. This emphasis on production activities supports the finding that continuous task-based learning can accelerate the internalization of vocabulary (Ellis, 2003; Samsudin and Sukarismanti, 2021).

Meanwhile, the findings of this study also show that the use of materials based on local wisdom has a positive impact on the development of students' cultural literacy. According to Rama, the incorporation of local culture in texts makes learning more enjoyable and personally meaningful, an embodiment of the CTL element of "connecting" learning to students' lives and sociocultural backgrounds. This emotional and cultural relevance increases motivation and engagement, supporting the idea that learning is most effective when it is personally meaningful (Johnson, 2002). The findings resonate with Samsudin et al. (2025) and Dewan (2025), who argue that culturally embedded materials foster not only linguistic competence but also intercultural awareness, especially critical for prospective teachers. Furthermore, Kireina's observation on students' enthusiasm for local folklore indicates that CTL fosters learner autonomy and curiosity, another key principle in contextual learning. The exposure to narrative texts rooted in students' culture also supports genre awareness and narrative structure comprehension, enhancing both reading and writing skills. These examples reaffirm that CTL is not only a pedagogical framework but also a culturally responsive approach that nurtures holistic language development.

Relating to the broader application of CTL, students' increased interest and motivation, highlighted by Rama, underscore the principle that learning occurs best when students see its relevance to their own lives. CTL, by situating language learning within familiar contexts, builds strong connections between content and learners' lived experiences. This relevance strengthens comprehension and long-term retention. This confirms that the contextualization of teaching materials plays a crucial role in fostering student engagement and shaping meaningful learning environments in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings (Herika et al., 2024; Omolu et al., 2022; Rasmin et al., 2024; Rasmin & Samsudin, 2024; Samsudin et al., 2024, 2023).

In relation to the application of the Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) approach, the findings of this study show that this approach plays an important role in increasing student engagement and interest. Rama noted that students feel interested and motivated to seek out more information about the teaching material because of its relevance to their local situation and context. This confirms that the local context-based approach strengthens the connection between learning and students' real lives, which in turn deepens their understanding of the teaching material (Herika et al., 2024; Omolu et al., 2022; Rasmin et al., 2024; Rasmin & Samsudin, 2024; Samsudin et al., 2024, 2023). These findings are in line with research by Omolu et al. (2022), which suggests that CTL can increase student engagement in English language learning by tailoring teaching materials to local needs and conditions. In addition, Kireina added that the use of local culture-based materials in CTL not only affects the improvement of vocabulary but also enriches students' reading comprehension. In this case, CTL not only focuses on developing linguistic skills but also creates a more meaningful learning experience by connecting teaching materials with students' real worlds.

However, a major challenge in this study is the significant resource limitations in the local context. As revealed by Rama, limited access to technological devices such as laptops or mobile phones hinders the use of more interactive and effective learning media. In addition, Kireina points out that the lack of teaching materials that elevate local culture in English requires educators to create their own translations, which requires extra effort. These findings illustrate the structural challenges faced in learning English in confined environments, which were also identified in a study by Hulu et al. (2024), which stated that the development of local materials is indispensable to maintain the relevance of language learning in EFL classrooms with limited resources. Jamal also emphasized that the search for materials that are appropriate to the local context and in English is still very limited. In the face of these challenges, the creativity and perseverance of educators are key to creating innovative solutions and ensuring effective quality learning, even in conditions of limited resources.

This research makes an important contribution to the development of English language learning theory and practice, particularly in the context of limited resources. Findings that show the effectiveness of using materials based on local wisdom and the Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) approach can provide guidance for educators in designing more relevant and meaningful English language learning. By adapting teaching materials to the local context, this study shows how the use of local culture can increase student engagement, enrich vocabulary, and deepen their understanding of the text. The research also broadens the understanding of how local culture-based learning can support cultural literacy, which is crucial in preparing students, especially prospective teachers, to teach languages in broader and more diverse contexts.

However, despite making a significant contribution, this study has some limitations that need to be noted. One of them is the limited sample size of only 3 lecturers from the institution, which may not fully represent the diversity of the EFL context in Indonesia as a whole. In addition, this study focuses more on qualitative data collection through interviews, so that the influence of broader external factors on learning outcomes, such as socioeconomic factors or educational policies, is not fully explored. Further research can expand the scope of the sample and use a mixed-methods approach to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of local wisdom-based learning in the EFL classroom. In addition, further research can also explore the long-term impact of the use of locally based materials on students' language mastery and cultural literacy in a broader context.

#### **CONCLUSIONS**

This study confirms that the implementation of the Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) approach based on local wisdom has a real positive impact on the development of students' vocabulary, reading comprehension, and cultural literacy in the context of English language learning in resource-limited environments. Teaching materials that are relevant to the local context not only increase students' engagement and motivation but also strengthen their connection with the target language through a more authentic and meaningful learning experience. Although the limitations of English-language facilities and references remain a significant challenge, the creativity and perseverance of educators in developing local materials have proven effective in overcoming these obstacles. Importantly, ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the research. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and their identities were anonymized to ensure confidentiality. The study posed minimal risk, as it focused on professional teaching practices. However, researchers remained sensitive to potential power dynamics between participants and institutions, ensuring that participation was entirely voluntary and non-coercive. These findings contribute meaningfully to the development of more adaptive and context-based English language learning strategies, particularly in underserved regions. To enrich understanding in this area, follow-up research is recommended to include a broader range of participants and explore the long-term impact of locally based materials on students' academic achievement and cultural identity

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