

Voices from the Archipelago: Empowering Cultural Identity and Engagement through Responsive Bilingual Narratives in EFL Classrooms

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Histori Naskah:

Submit: 2026-05-04
Accepted: 2026-05-10
Published: 2026-05-14



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Abstract:

This study explores how culturally responsive bilingual narratives support students' cultural identity and engagement in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. Using a qualitative exploratory design supported by complementary quantitative data, the research involved 17 eighth-grade students from a public junior high school in Ambon, Maluku. Data were collected through classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, artifact analysis, and a post-instruction feedback questionnaire. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically, while quantitative data were examined using descriptive statistics and reliability testing. The findings show that culturally responsive pedagogy-based bilingual narratives increased student engagement, reduced language anxiety, and strengthened cultural pride. Students also found the learning materials meaningful, relevant, and easier to understand because they connected English learning to local cultural experiences. The questionnaire demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.87), indicating reliable support for students' perceptions of the instructional materials. Rather than assessing language proficiency, the questionnaire was intended to capture students' responses to the learning experience and the cultural relevance of the materials used in class. The study further highlights that integrating local cultural narratives into bilingual learning materials can create a more inclusive and emotionally supportive classroom environment, particularly in archipelagic and multilingual educational settings. These findings contribute to the limited body of research on culturally responsive bilingual instruction in Indonesian EFL contexts and emphasize the pedagogical importance of integrating local identity, language, and culture into English language teaching practices.

Keywords: Bilingual Learning; Culturally Responsive Pedagogy; Cultural Identity; EFL; Student Engagement

Introduction

English language teaching in Indonesia frequently relies on materials rooted in Western or urban-centered contexts, which often fail to reflect the sociocultural realities of students living in remote and archipelagic regions (Banks, 2015). In Maluku, where everyday life is deeply shaped by maritime traditions, communal relationships, and local wisdom such as *Pela Gandong*, this contextual mismatch may reduce students' engagement, emotional connection, and sense of relevance in the learning process. When learners do not encounter their cultural identity within classroom materials, language learning tends to become mechanical, decontextualized, and less meaningful (Norton, 2013). Such conditions indicate the importance of developing instructional approaches that are culturally relevant and responsive to students lived experiences.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) emphasizes the integration of students' cultural backgrounds, experiences, and identities into classroom instruction in order to promote academic achievement, cultural competence, and critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2018). Within EFL classrooms, culturally responsive bilingual narratives can function not only as linguistic scaffolding but also as a pedagogical bridge connecting English learning with local cultural values and identities. Previous studies have demonstrated that culturally relevant materials can enhance motivation, participation, and learning engagement; however, most existing research has focused primarily on urban or generalized EFL contexts. Limited attention has been given to the implementation of culturally responsive bilingual materials in underrepresented archipelagic settings such as Maluku, where multilingual realities and local cultural traditions strongly influence students' learning experiences.

This gap reveals a significant research urgency because the absence of culturally contextualized materials may continue to marginalize students' identities and weaken meaningful engagement in English learning. Moreover, previous studies have rarely examined how bilingual narratives grounded in local culture influence both students' engagement and their sense of cultural identity simultaneously. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by investigating the implementation of CRP-based bilingual narratives in an EFL classroom situated in an archipelagic context. Specifically, this study aims to answer the following research questions: (1) How do culturally responsive bilingual narratives influence students' engagement in EFL classrooms? and (2) How do these narratives support students' cultural identity development in the context of English language learning?

Study Literatur

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) emphasizes the integration of students' cultural backgrounds, lived experiences, and community values into the learning process in order to create meaningful, equitable, and inclusive educational experiences (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2018). Rather than treating culture as an additional classroom element, CRP positions culture as a central pedagogical resource that shapes how knowledge is constructed, interpreted, and negotiated in educational settings. Ladson-Billings (1995) argues that culturally responsive teaching promotes not only academic achievement but also cultural competence and sociopolitical consciousness, enabling students to maintain their cultural identity while succeeding academically. Gay (2018) further explains that culturally responsive instruction strengthens students' emotional connection to learning because classroom materials become more relevant to their social realities and everyday experiences.

In multilingual and postcolonial contexts such as Indonesia, CRP becomes particularly important because English language instruction often privileges dominant global cultures while marginalizing local identities and indigenous knowledge. Paris (2012) and Paris and Alim (2017) extend this perspective through the concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy, which emphasizes the importance of preserving and sustaining students' linguistic and cultural practices within formal education. This perspective suggests that EFL instruction should not merely expose learners to English as a global language, but also empower them to negotiate and affirm their local cultural identities through language learning. Therefore, culturally responsive bilingual narratives may serve as a pedagogical space where students can connect English learning with their own cultural experiences and social realities.

Bilingual Learning in EFL

Bilingual learning provides learners with opportunities to construct meaning across languages and cultural systems, allowing them to access new knowledge without abandoning their first language resources (García, 2009). In EFL contexts, bilingual instructional practices help reduce cognitive overload by enabling learners to process unfamiliar concepts through familiar linguistic frameworks. García (2009) argues that bilingualism should not be viewed as the separation of two autonomous languages, but rather as a dynamic and integrated communicative repertoire that multilingual learners strategically employ to make meaning.

This perspective is further reinforced through the concept of translanguaging, which refers to the flexible use of multiple linguistic resources to support comprehension, interaction, and participation in multilingual classrooms (García & Wei, 2014). Translanguaging practices allow students to move fluidly between languages, thereby reducing language anxiety and creating more inclusive learning environments. In culturally diverse classrooms, bilingual learning also functions as a bridge between global knowledge and local cultural identity. When students encounter instructional materials that combine English with familiar cultural narratives and local languages, they are more likely to perceive learning as accessible and personally meaningful. Consequently, bilingual learning is not only a linguistic strategy but also a sociocultural practice that supports inclusion, participation, and identity affirmation.

Identity in Language Learning

Identity plays a central role in language learning because learners' investment in acquiring a new language is closely related to how they perceive themselves and how they are positioned within social and educational contexts (Norton, 2013). Language learning is therefore not merely a cognitive activity but also a social and emotional process involving issues of belonging, recognition, and power. Norton (2013) emphasizes that learners are more motivated to participate in language learning when they feel their identities, experiences, and voices are acknowledged within classroom practices. Similarly, Norton and Toohey (2011) argue that language learners actively negotiate their identities through interaction, participation, and access to meaningful learning opportunities.

Within EFL classrooms, culturally disconnected materials may unintentionally position students as passive recipients of foreign knowledge rather than active participants whose local experiences are valued. Conversely, when learning materials reflect students' cultural backgrounds and social realities, learners are more likely to develop confidence, emotional engagement, and a stronger sense of ownership in the learning process. In this sense, CRP, bilingual learning, and identity are conceptually interconnected. CRP provides the pedagogical framework for recognizing students' cultural backgrounds, bilingual learning offers linguistic access and participation, and identity becomes the outcome shaped through meaningful engagement with culturally relevant content. The integration of these three dimensions is particularly important in archipelagic EFL contexts where local identity and multilingual realities strongly influence students' educational experiences.

Evaluation of Learning Materials

The effectiveness of instructional materials can be evaluated through learners' perceptions of engagement, clarity, relevance, and meaningfulness within the learning process (Tomlinson, 2011). Tomlinson (2011) argues that successful language learning materials should not only develop linguistic competence but also stimulate emotional involvement, cultural connection, and learner motivation. Materials that are culturally distant or linguistically inaccessible may limit participation and reduce students' willingness to engage actively in classroom interaction.

Learner-centered evaluation therefore becomes essential in understanding how students experience instructional materials in authentic classroom contexts. Richards (2001) explains that evaluating teaching materials should include students' perspectives because learners are central participants in the instructional process. Similarly, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) emphasize that instructional materials should be assessed based on their relevance to learners' needs, interests, and sociocultural backgrounds. In the context of culturally responsive bilingual narratives, learner perceptions provide valuable insight into whether the materials successfully support comprehension, reduce language barriers, and foster cultural connection. Thus, evaluating students' responses is not merely a supplementary activity but an important component in assessing the pedagogical value of culturally responsive EFL materials.

Research Methods

This study employed a qualitative exploratory design supported by complementary quantitative data to strengthen interpretation through triangulation (Creswell, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The study was primarily qualitative because it aimed to explore students' engagement and cultural identity within a naturally occurring EFL classroom context, while quantitative data functioned only as supporting evidence rather than as the basis for statistical generalization. The participants were 17 eighth-grade students from a public junior high school in Ambon, Maluku, selected through purposive sampling due to their direct involvement in CRP-based bilingual learning activities. The instructional materials consisted of culturally responsive bilingual short stories integrating Maluku cultural contexts, communal traditions, and local experiences familiar to students. These materials functioned as learning media designed to connect English learning with students' sociocultural backgrounds in line with the principles of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2018).

Data Collection

Data were collected through multiple qualitative and supporting quantitative sources to ensure triangulation and strengthen interpretive validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The data collection techniques included:

- a. Classroom observation
- b. Semi-structured interviews
- c. Student reflective journals
- d. Artifact analysis
- e. Student feedback questionnaire

Classroom observations focused on students' participation, interaction patterns, emotional responses, and engagement during learning activities. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore students' perceptions of the bilingual narratives and their experiences of cultural connection in the classroom. Reflective journals allowed students to express personal responses and reflections regarding the learning process, while artifact analysis examined students' written work and classroom outputs as evidence of engagement and meaning construction.

Student Feedback Instrument

The student feedback questionnaire was adapted from frameworks in materials evaluation and learner perception developed by Tomlinson (2011), Richards (2001), and Hutchinson and Waters (1987). These frameworks emphasize evaluating instructional materials based on learners' perceptions of engagement, clarity, relevance, and meaningfulness within the learning process. The questionnaire was not intended to

measure language proficiency or academic achievement; instead, it functioned as complementary supporting data to capture students' perceptions of the instructional materials and classroom experience.

The instrument consisted of Likert-scale items measuring several dimensions:

- a. Learning interest
- b. Comprehension
- c. Visual support
- d. Cultural relevance
- e. Motivation

The adaptation process involved several stages to ensure contextual appropriateness and content validity:

1. Selecting key theoretical constructs from materials evaluation literature
2. Simplifying item wording for junior high school students
3. Aligning questionnaire items with CRP principles and bilingual learning objectives
4. Conducting expert judgment to establish content validity and clarity of items

The inclusion of quantitative feedback data was methodologically justified as a form of supportive triangulation intended to enrich qualitative interpretation. The questionnaire enabled the researcher to identify broader patterns in students' perceptions that complemented insights obtained from observations, interviews, and reflective journals.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. First, the researcher familiarized themselves with the data through repeated reading of interview transcripts, observation notes, reflective journals, and classroom artifacts. Second, initial codes were generated to identify recurring patterns related to engagement, cultural identity, emotional responses, and perceptions of bilingual learning. Third, related codes were grouped into broader categories and candidate themes. Fourth, themes were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and consistency across data sources. Fifth, themes were clearly defined and named to reflect the central meanings emerging from participants' experiences. Finally, the findings were interpreted and presented by connecting themes to the theoretical framework of CRP, bilingual learning, and identity in language education.

Quantitative data from the feedback questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics to summarize students' responses and identify general tendencies regarding engagement, relevance, and comprehension. Reliability testing was also conducted to evaluate the internal consistency of the instrument.

Reliability

The questionnaire demonstrated high internal consistency with a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.87, indicating that the instrument reliably captured students' perceptions of the instructional materials and learning experience.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied several strategies proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), including triangulation and member checking. Triangulation was achieved by comparing findings across multiple data sources such as observations, interviews, journals, artifacts, and questionnaire responses. Member checking was conducted by allowing participants to review and confirm the accuracy of selected interview interpretations and thematic findings. In addition, prolonged engagement during classroom observation and reflective memo writing were employed to strengthen interpretive transparency and reduce researcher bias throughout the analytical process.

Hasil

Cultural Resonance

Students demonstrated strong emotional connections to culturally relevant bilingual narratives, particularly when the stories reflected familiar traditions, social practices, and daily experiences from Maluku. During interviews, one student stated that the stories felt “closer to our real life,” while another mentioned that learning English through local culture made the lessons “more interesting and easier to understand.” Classroom observations also showed higher participation and discussion engagement when students encountered topics related to *Pela Gandong* and local communal values. These findings support the principles of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, which emphasize the importance of cultural relevance in creating meaningful and engaging learning experiences (Gay, 2018).

Reduced Language Anxiety

Students also demonstrated increased confidence and willingness to use English during classroom activities. Several participants reported feeling less afraid of making mistakes because the bilingual narratives provided familiar linguistic and cultural contexts that helped them understand the lesson content more easily. One student explained, “I can understand the story first in Indonesian, so I feel more confident speaking in English.” Observation data further indicated that students participated more actively in discussions and asked more questions compared to previous lessons using conventional materials. This finding aligns with bilingual scaffolding and translanguaging theory, which argues that the use of familiar language resources can reduce cognitive load and facilitate participation in multilingual classrooms (García & Wei, 2014).

Identity Empowerment

The findings further revealed that culturally responsive bilingual narratives contributed to students’ sense of cultural pride and identity affirmation. Students expressed positive feelings about seeing Maluku culture represented in English learning materials, particularly because such representation was rarely encountered in previous classroom experiences. One participant stated that the stories made them feel “proud that our culture can also be learned in English.” Reflective journals also showed that students viewed local traditions and cultural values as important aspects of their identity that deserved recognition in educational settings. These findings support identity investment theory, which emphasizes that learners become more engaged when their identities and cultural backgrounds are acknowledged within language learning practices (Norton, 2013).

Quantitative Findings (Student Feedback)

Dimension	Mean	Category
Interest	4.3	Very Good
Comprehension	4.05	Good
Visual	3.9	Good
Cultural	4.4	Very Good
Motivation	4.5	Very Good

Overall Mean: **4.23 (Very Good)**

Cronbach Alpha: **0.87 (High Reliability)**

The quantitative findings support the qualitative results, indicating that students perceived the CRP-based bilingual narratives positively across all evaluated dimensions. Cultural relevance and motivation received the highest scores, suggesting that integrating Maluku cultural contexts increased students' emotional engagement and willingness to participate in English learning activities. The comprehension and visual support dimensions also showed positive responses, indicating that the bilingual materials helped students understand lesson content more easily and meaningfully. The overall mean score of 4.23 categorized the instructional materials as "Very Good," while the Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.87 demonstrated high internal consistency, confirming that the questionnaire reliably captured students' perceptions of the learning experience rather than measuring language proficiency.

Discussion

The findings indicate that CRP-based bilingual narratives significantly enhance student engagement, reduce language anxiety, and strengthen students' cultural identity in EFL classrooms. The qualitative data provide deeper insights into how students emotionally connected with learning materials that reflected their lived experiences, while the quantitative findings confirm that students perceived the materials as relevant, meaningful, and motivating. These findings are consistent with previous studies emphasizing that culturally responsive teaching fosters meaningful participation and stronger learner engagement by connecting instruction with students' sociocultural backgrounds (Gay, 2018). Similarly, the findings support García and Wei's (2014) argument that bilingual and translanguaging practices facilitate comprehension and participation by reducing cognitive barriers in multilingual classrooms.

However, this study extends previous research in several important ways. Most prior studies on culturally responsive pedagogy and bilingual learning have focused on urban, mainstream, or generalized educational settings, whereas this study specifically investigates an underrepresented archipelagic context in Maluku, where local identity, multilingual realities, and communal traditions strongly shape students' educational experiences. The findings suggest that in archipelagic regions, cultural representation is not merely an additional instructional feature but a central factor influencing students' emotional engagement and sense of belonging in language learning. In this context, bilingual narratives functioned not only as linguistic scaffolding tools but also as sociocultural bridges connecting English learning with local identity and community values. This demonstrates that culturally responsive bilingual materials may play a more transformative role in marginalized or geographically peripheral contexts than previously discussed in mainstream CRP literature.

The findings also contribute theoretically by strengthening the conceptual relationship between Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, bilingual learning, and identity investment. Previous studies often discuss these concepts separately; however, this study demonstrates how they interact dynamically within classroom practice. CRP provides the pedagogical foundation for integrating learners' cultural backgrounds, bilingual learning facilitates comprehension and participation, and identity investment emerges when students perceive their culture and experiences as valued within the learning process (Norton, 2013). The interaction of these elements creates a more inclusive learning environment in which students are not only language learners but also active cultural subjects whose identities are validated through instruction.

In addition, the study highlights that culturally responsive bilingual narratives can support affective dimensions of learning that are frequently overlooked in conventional EFL instruction, particularly confidence, emotional safety, and cultural pride. Many students reported feeling more confident using English because the materials reduced psychological distance between the target language and their local realities. This finding suggests that engagement in EFL classrooms is not determined solely by linguistic difficulty but also by the extent to which instructional materials acknowledge learners' identities and cultural experiences. Such findings challenge conventional assumptions that English learning should prioritize exposure to native-speaker or globalized cultural content at the expense of local knowledge and identity.

Furthermore, the integration of qualitative and quantitative data strengthens the validity and credibility of the findings through methodological triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). While qualitative data captured nuanced student experiences and identity negotiation processes, the quantitative feedback data provided broader evidence regarding students' positive perceptions of the instructional materials. The convergence of these findings increases interpretive trustworthiness and demonstrates that students' engagement was consistently reflected across multiple sources of evidence. Overall, this study suggests that culturally responsive bilingual narratives have significant pedagogical potential for creating more inclusive, contextually relevant, and identity-affirming EFL learning environments, particularly in culturally diverse and underrepresented archipelagic settings.

Conclusion

CRP-based bilingual narratives effectively enhance student engagement, reduce language anxiety, and strengthen students' cultural identity in EFL classrooms. The findings demonstrate that culturally responsive bilingual materials function not only as instructional tools but also as pedagogical resources that connect English learning with learners' sociocultural experiences and identity investment. This study extends previous research on CRP and bilingual education by emphasizing the importance of local cultural representation in underrepresented archipelagic contexts, where students' identities are often absent from classroom materials. Integrating local cultural narratives into bilingual EFL instruction therefore has the potential to create more meaningful, inclusive, and identity-affirming learning environments.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. The relatively small sample size (18 students) and the focus on a specific cultural context may limit the broader generalizability of the findings. In addition, the quantitative feedback data were based on students' perceptions rather than objective measures of language proficiency. Despite these limitations, the study offers important pedagogical implications. Teachers are encouraged to integrate culturally relevant bilingual materials to improve engagement and learning relevance, while curriculum developers should consider local cultural narratives in instructional design. Future studies are recommended to explore similar approaches in different sociocultural contexts with larger participant groups and more diverse forms of data collection.

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