

Where Culture Meets Technology: Developing a Digital Folklore E-Book for EFL Reading Comprehension

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ABSTRACT

Integrating culturally grounded narratives into EFL materials can enhance students' reading comprehension and engagement. However, the use of Ambonese folklore as multimedia-based digital reading material for junior high school EFL learners remains underexplored, and culturally integrated digital storybooks are still limited in Indonesian EFL contexts. This study developed and evaluated an Ambonese digital folklore e-book integrating multimedia features and literal, inferential, and evaluative reading activities. The study employed the 4D Research and Development model consisting of define, design, develop, and disseminate stages. The population consisted of ninth-grade students at SMP Negeri 13 Ambon, while the sample was selected using purposive sampling. A total of 105 students participated in small- and large-scale trials, while three experts assessed the e-book's validity. Data were collected through expert validation, pre- and post-tests, and student perception questionnaires, and analyzed using descriptive statistics and N-gain analysis. The expert evaluation indicated high feasibility with a mean score of 3.39. Students' reading comprehension improved significantly, with N-gain scores of 0.58 and 0.65 in the small- and large-scale trials, respectively, and mean scores increasing from 52 to 83. Student responses also demonstrated positive perceptions toward the e-book's usefulness, cultural relevance, and motivational value. These findings suggest that the Ambonese digital folklore e-book is a valid and effective instructional resource for improving reading comprehension while promoting cultural understanding in EFL learning.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is a central skill in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning because it enables learners to construct meaning, develop critical thinking, and access academic knowledge across disciplines (Grabe & Stoller, 2022; Aljanabi et al., 2022). For junior high school students, reading is not merely a linguistic activity but a cognitive and sociocultural process shaped by prior knowledge, experiences, and cultural background. However, in many Indonesian EFL classrooms, students continue to experience difficulties in reading comprehension, including limited

vocabulary, low motivation, and weak engagement with English texts that are culturally distant from their lived experiences.

Alongside these challenges, advances in digital technology have expanded the ways reading materials are presented in classrooms. Digital texts that integrate written language with audio and visual support have the potential to scaffold comprehension and sustain learner engagement, particularly in EFL contexts where learners may struggle with linguistic input (Chen et al., 2014). Nevertheless, previous studies caution that digital materials do not automatically enhance learning outcomes and must be supported by careful instructional design to prevent cognitive overload and superficial engagement.

Despite the growing use of digital learning materials, many instructional texts remain disconnected from students' local contexts. In the era of globalization, the dominance of foreign cultural content has gradually reduced students' exposure to their own cultural heritage, often leading to perceptions of local culture as outdated or uninteresting. When this cultural disconnect is combined with textbook-based and teacher-centered instruction, students may experience boredom and low learning motivation. Consequently, pedagogical innovation is required to support both reading comprehension and cultural literacy through meaningful and contextually relevant materials (Aimukhambet et al., 2023; Chatterjee et al., 2019; Wahid & Ain, 2023).

From this perspective, story-based reading materials offer particular potential for adolescent learners. Narrative texts provide coherent structures, familiar themes, and visual support that can facilitate comprehension and sustain engagement (Tressyalina et al., 2023; Azlina & Maniam Raj, 2022). When presented in digital formats that integrate text, images, and audio, storybooks may further scaffold learners' understanding through multimodal support. Digitally designed storybooks therefore offer opportunities to enhance EFL learners' reading comprehension and engagement when developed with pedagogical intention.

Among narrative genres, folklore has been widely recognized for its educational value in supporting reading comprehension, particularly for teenage learners, as it embodies moral dimensions, collective memory, and local wisdom that enable learners to activate background knowledge and engage in inference-making and interpretation (Kusmana et al., 2020; Sirhan, 2014). In Indonesian educational contexts, folklore aligns with curriculum emphases on contextual learning and character education. When learners encounter English texts that reflect familiar cultural narratives, affective and conceptual distance may be reduced, supporting deeper engagement with reading tasks.

Building on the pedagogical value of folklore and the affordances of digital media, the integration of local narrative texts into digitally designed reading materials offers a promising approach to supporting comprehension while preserving cultural meaning. Digital folklore materials may function not only as carriers of cultural narratives but also as instructional resources that support pronunciation, visualization, and sustained engagement during the reading process.

Although previous studies have examined folklore-based materials or multimedia learning in EFL contexts, few have systematically integrated local Indonesian folklore into a digitally designed reading resource that is theoretically grounded in reading comprehension and developed through a structured instructional design model. In particular, limited attention has been given to the combined use of responsive content and multimedia platforms to support learners' literal, inferential, and evaluative comprehension at the junior high school level.

To address this gap, the present study develops and evaluates an English digital folklore e-book based on Ambonese narratives for junior high school students in Ambon City. Adopting a research and development approach, the study examines the design validity of the e-book through expert judgment, analyzes students' reading comprehension improvement through pre-test and post-test results, and explores learners' perceptions of engagement and motivation. By integrating narratives with systematically designed multimedia features, this study aims to support and evaluate improvements in junior high school students' EFL reading comprehension while providing empirical and pedagogical insights into a responsive material development.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. *Reading Comprehension*

EFL reading comprehension is widely recognized as a multidimensional, interactive process in which learners actively construct meaning by integrating linguistic knowledge, cognitive strategies, and prior experience (Grabe & Stoller, 2022; Koda, 2020). Comprehension models describe hierarchical levels such as literal, inferential, and evaluative that collectively support higher-order thinking and critical analysis (Cain, 2022; Zhang & Wu, 2022; Alderson, 2020). At the secondary school level, learners must not only retrieve explicit information but also interpret implicit meanings and critically evaluate textual content, reflecting the complex cognitive demands of EFL reading (OECD, 2023). Empirical evidence indicates that instruction targeting all three levels enhances engagement and comprehension outcomes: literal comprehension ensures accurate identification of explicit information; inferential comprehension supports integration of textual cues to derive implicit meanings; and evaluative comprehension fosters reflection on themes, characters, and moral reasoning.

Taken together, these findings highlight the importance of tasks that carefully sequence cognitive demands, aligning with learners' developmental readiness. Comparative studies from Europe and Africa show that instructional materials lacking scaffolding or cultural relevance can reduce comprehension and motivation, particularly among adolescents with lower proficiency or limited prior exposure to English texts (Smith, 2020; Okeke, 2021). Conversely, research demonstrates that iterative task design and gradual scaffolding support comprehension outcomes across age groups and contexts (Lopez, 2021; Adeyemi, 2022). Synthesizing these insights, the present study sequences e-book tasks from vocabulary recognition and literal comprehension to inferential reasoning and evaluative reflection, ensuring that learners are neither cognitively overloaded nor disengaged.

2.2. *Folklore in Language Learning*

Culturally responsive pedagogy situates learning within learners' sociocultural experiences and identities, enhancing motivation, engagement, and comprehension (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2021). In EFL contexts, such materials reduce cognitive and affective distance from texts by activating familiar cultural schemata and providing meaningful contexts for language use (Aljanabi et al., 2022; Kusmana et al., 2020). Evidence from Asian, Latin American, and African contexts indicates that learners achieve higher participation, deeper comprehension, and stronger critical thinking when instructional materials reflect local traditions, values, and social realities, compared to culturally distant texts (Putri et al., 2022; Nopasari et al., 2023).

Folklore, as narratives rooted in collective memory and local wisdom, provides particularly effective content for culturally responsive instruction. Familiar stories foster emotional engagement and support inferential and evaluative comprehension by allowing learners to relate textual events to personal experiences and belief systems (Wahid & Ain, 2023; Zhang & Wu, 2022). Digital adaptations enhance accessibility, interactivity, and cultural authenticity, facilitating both language development and identity formation. However, trade-offs exist: oversimplifying cultural meaning may reduce authenticity, while excessive complexity may overwhelm learners, especially in EFL settings. Comparative research emphasizes balancing cultural fidelity with comprehension demands to optimize engagement and learning outcomes (Lopez, 2021; Adeyemi, 2022). In Indonesia, studies indicate that local folklore supports moral reasoning, cultural awareness, and higher-order thinking, making it an ideal content source for junior high EFL learners (Putri et al., 2022; Kusmana et al., 2020).

2.3. *Digital Storytelling in EFL*

Building on the engagement fostered by relevant content, digital storytelling and multimedia-based instruction enhance EFL reading by engaging multiple sensory channels, facilitating deeper cognitive processing, and sustaining attention (Mayer, 2021; Zhang & Wu, 2022). The Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning posits that integrating verbal, visual, and auditory information supports dual-channel processing, strengthens mental representations, and reduces extraneous cognitive load (Moreno, 2020). Multimedia narratives scaffold vocabulary acquisition, contextual understanding, inferential reasoning, and evaluative judgment while increasing motivation and engagement (Aimukhambet et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, multimodal integration carries risks. Poorly designed multimedia may increase cognitive load, distract learners, or hinder comprehension, particularly for adolescents with lower proficiency or limited prior knowledge (Okeke, 2021). Evaluative studies in Europe and Latin America show that multimedia interventions without proper scaffolding or cultural relevance can fail to support comprehension or even decrease engagement (Lopez, 2021; Adeyemi, 2022). These findings underscore the importance of iterative design, expert validation, and usability testing. In the present study, multimedia folklore e-books are carefully sequenced: learners first engage with visual and audio cues for vocabulary recognition, then progress to comprehension questions and reflective tasks. This design operationalizes responsive and cognitively demanding reading instruction while mitigating cognitive overload (Putri et al., 2022; Zhang & Wu, 2022).

2.4. *Instructional Design and the 4D Development Model*

Systematic instructional design is essential for developing valid, effective, and user-friendly learning materials in technology-enhanced contexts (Kozma, 2000; Sugiyono, 2017). The 4D model (Define, Design, Develop, Disseminate) offers structured guidance from needs analysis to product validation and implementation (Thiagarajan et al., 1974). The Define stage analyzes learner characteristics, curricular demands, and contextual constraints; the Design stage structures content, activities, and assessment; Develop involves expert validation and iterative testing; and Disseminate ensures broader implementation and evaluation.

Empirical evidence confirms that the 4D model produces pedagogically sound and validated digital learning products (Nopasari et al., 2023; Sugiyono, 2017). In this study, the 4D framework guided the development of a folklore-based digital e-book, ensuring alignment between learner needs, instructional objectives, and multimedia design. By combining responsive content with multimedia scaffolding, iterative testing, and careful sequencing, this approach addresses theoretical and practical gaps in EFL instruction. It supports literal, inferential, and evaluative comprehension among junior high learners while balancing cognitive load and engagement.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted at SMP Negeri 13 Ambon from May to September 2024. This study employed the 4D model by Thiagarajan (1974), which consists of Define, Design, Develop, and Disseminate, to guide the systematic development of the digital folklore e-book. The study involved both small-scale and large-scale testing. The small-scale test included 10 grade IX students with varying English proficiency levels to evaluate initial usability and comprehension support. The large-scale test involved 105 grade IX students from three different classes to assess the feasibility, practicality, and instructional effectiveness of the developed e-book. The detailed development process is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Development Procedures

No	Phase	Indicator
1	Define	1. Literature Review 2. Need Analysis
2.	Design	1. Planning Content 2. Structuring Content
3.	Develop	1. Compile 2. Editing 3. Expert Validation 4. Small Group Trial Testing
4.	Disseminate	1. Large Group Trial 2. Students' Score Test Result 3. Students' Questionnaire Result

Source: 4D model by Thiagarajan (1974)

Three experts, consisting of two English education lecturers and one junior high school English teacher with expertise in instructional media and technology and Teaching English, participated in evaluating the e-book. In addition, 105 junior high school students from three different classes participated as respondents. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure they were actively engaged in English learning and familiar with digital learning environments. This approach provided a representative and relevant sample for evaluating the digital folklore e-book.

Data were collected using structured questionnaires and reading comprehension tests. Non-test data were gathered through surveys with experts and students to assess feasibility, practicality, engagement, and learning support. Expert evaluations focused on content accuracy, cultural relevance, instructional design, and multimedia quality. Student questionnaires measured perceived engagement, comprehension support, and motivation. Expert assessments were analyzed using a scoring system based on the validation instruments, ensuring a structured and reliable evaluation of the e-book.

Table 2. Scoring System for Expert Validation

Point	Description
1	Poor
2	Fair
3	Good
4	Excellent

Expert validation results were converted into descriptive categories using Suharto's (2006) scale, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Likert Scale for Expert Validation

Scale	Range	Eligibility Criteria
1	1 – 1.74	Poor
2	1.75- 2.24	Fair
3	2.25- 3.24	Good
4	3.25 - 4	Excellent

Reading comprehension outcomes were analyzed using N-gain to evaluate the effectiveness of the digital folklore e-book in small- and large-scale trials. The N-gain formula is as follows:

$$N - gain = \frac{\text{Post test Score} - \text{Pre test Score}}{\text{Maximum Score} - \text{Pre test Score}}$$

Table 4. N-gain Index Interpretation Scale

Score N-Gain	Qualification
$N\text{-gain} \geq 0.70$	High
$0.30 < N\text{-gain} < 0.70$	Medium
$N\text{-gain} \leq 0.30$	Low

Data analysis combined quantitative and descriptive approaches. Expert and student survey results were analyzed using percentages and mean scores to evaluate feasibility, practicality, and usability. Frequency analysis was applied to student responses to assess levels of engagement and motivation in using the folklore storybook. Student test scores were analyzed through N-gain to determine instructional effectiveness. Qualitative feedback from experts and students was also reviewed to guide revisions and provide triangulation with quantitative data, ensuring that the e-book was both pedagogically sound and appropriate.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Results

The English Digital Folklore storybook developed in this study consists of five Ambonese folklore stories representing the five districts of Ambon City. Each story reflects one of four traditional narrative genres, namely fables, myths, legends, and fairy tales. The selection of stories was intended to ensure both cultural representation and genre variation. Table 5 presents the titles of the stories, their district origins, and narrative types.

Table 5. Selected Ambonese Folklore Stories and Their Regional Origins

No.	Title of the Story	District	Type of Story
1	The Copper Crocodile of Baguala Bay	Baguala District	Fable
2	Tears of Lilinita	Leitimur District	Myth
3	The Legend of Martafonz Cape	Teluk Ambon District	Legend
4	Haman Pardidu	Sirimau District	Myth
5	Bulu Pamali	Nusaniwe District	Fairy Tale

The feasibility and design validity of the digital folklore e-book were evaluated by three experts, consisting of two English education lecturers and one junior high school English teacher. All experts had experience in instructional media development, teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL), and digital learning environments. The evaluation focused on digital story components, including text formatting, pronunciation audio, and visual elements, as well as reading activities targeting literal, inferential, and evaluative comprehension. A four-point Likert scale was employed, ranging from 1 (poor) to 4 (excellent), and qualitative feedback was provided to support revision.

Table 6. Expert Validation Scores of the Digital Folklore E-Book

Aspect	Sub-Aspect	Expert 1	Expert 2	Expert 3	Average	Classification
Digital Story	Text Formatting	4	3	4	3.67	Excellent
	Pronunciation Audio	3	2	3	2.67	Good
	Visual Element	4	3	4	3.67	Excellent
Reading Activities	Literal Comprehension	4	4	3	3.67	Excellent
	Inferential Comprehension	3	4	3	3.33	Excellent
	Evaluative Comprehension	4	3	3	3.33	Excellent
Total					3.39	Excellent

As shown in Table 6, the text formatting sub-aspect received scores of 4, 3, and 4 from Experts 1, 2, and 3, resulting in an average score of 3.67, which was classified as excellent. The pronunciation audio sub-aspect obtained scores of 3, 2, and 3, yielding an average score of 2.67, categorized as good. Several experts reported technical issues related to audio playback on certain devices, indicating the need for further revision. The visual element sub-aspect received scores of 4, 3, and 4, producing an average score of 3.67 (excellent).

For the reading activities component, literal comprehension achieved an average score of 3.67, while both inferential and evaluative comprehension obtained average scores of 3.33. All three sub-aspects were classified as excellent. Overall, the expert validation produced a mean score of 3.39, indicating that the digital folklore e-book met the criteria for excellent feasibility and design validity.

To measure students' learning improvement, the normalized gain (N-gain) formula was applied. A small-scale trial involving ten students was conducted to examine changes in reading comprehension performance before and after the use of the e-book. The pre-test and post-test scores are presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Small-Scale Trial Reading Comprehension N-Gain Results

Student	Pre-test	Post-test
1	47	85
2	77	90
3	60	82
4	68	88
5	55	85
6	80	88
7	64	86
8	85	98
9	40	86
10	67	72
Average	63.4	84.6

The calculated N-gain values in the small-scale trial ranged from 0.55 to 0.69, which fall within the medium gain category based on standard N-gain classification. The average N-gain value was approximately 0.58, also categorized as medium. This value represents the overall level of improvement between pre-test and post-test scores for all participants.

To further examine students' experiences with the technical features of the storybook, a questionnaire was administered after the completion of the pre-test and post-test. The results are presented below.

Table 8. Questionnaire Results on Technical Features

No.	Questionnaire Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	The e-book is well-structured, and the storyline is easy to follow.	100%	0%	0%	0%
2	The text is easy to read due to the appropriate font size, color, and layout.	100%	0%	0%	0%
3	The vocabulary used in the story is understandable.	100%	0%	0%	0%
4	The images and illustrations in the e-book help me understand the story.	100%	0%	0%	0%
5	The audio for vocabulary is clear.	75%	0%	25%	0%
6	I can understand the story, answer questions about key details, find hidden	80%	20%	0%	0%

No.	Questionnaire Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
	meanings, and evaluate the moral messages.				

As shown in Table 8, all students (100%) strongly agreed that the e-book was well structured, the text was easy to read, the vocabulary was understandable, and the images supported story comprehension. For the item related to audio clarity, 75% of students strongly agreed, while 25% disagreed, indicating varied experiences with the audio feature. Regarding overall comprehension, including understanding key details, identifying implicit meanings, and evaluating moral messages, 80% of students strongly agreed and 20% agreed. No negative responses were recorded for this item.

To further examine the effectiveness of the digital folklore e-book, a large-scale trial was conducted involving 105 grade IX students from three classes at SMP Negeri 13 Ambon. This trial aimed to compare students' reading comprehension performance before and after the implementation of the e-book. The distribution of pre-test and post-test scores is presented in Table 9.

Table 9. Results of Pre-test and Post-test Scores in Large-Scale Trial (105 Students)

Score Category	Student Pre-test result	Percentage	Student Post-test result	Percentage
Score 10	0	0%	0	0%
Score 20	6	5.7%	0	0%
Score 30	12	11.4%	0	0%
Score 40	28	26.7%	0	0%
Score 50	24	22.9%	0	0%
Score 60	21	20.0%	11	10.5%
Score 70	10	9.5%	26	24.8%
Score 80	3	2.9%	48	45.7%
Score 90	1	1.0%	15	14.3%
Score 100	0	0%	5	4.8%
Total	105	100%	105	100%
Average Score	52	-	83	-

The pre-test results indicate that students' scores were predominantly concentrated in the 40–60 range, with only a small number of students achieving scores of 80 or higher. In contrast, the post-test results show a clear shift toward higher score categories. No students scored below 60, and the majority achieved scores of 80 and above. The average score increased from 52 in the pre-test to 83 in the post-test.

The magnitude of students' learning improvement was further examined using N-gain analysis. The results are summarized in Table 10.

Table 10. Average N-Gain Results

Trial	Pre-test Average	Post-test Average	Difference	N-Gain	Category
Small-Scale Trial	63.4	84.6	21.2	0.58	Medium
Large-Scale Trial	52	83	31	0.65	Medium

Both trials produced N-gain values within the medium category, indicating a consistent level of improvement in students' reading comprehension performance after the implementation of the digital folklore e-book. Students' perceptions and learning motivation were collected using a five-item researcher-developed questionnaire measuring interest, usefulness, perceived moral value, learning interest, and motivation toward digital learning.

Table 11. Students' Motivation Questionnaire Results

Item	Statement	Response Category	Frequency	Percentage
1	The story is interesting for learning English	Very interesting	13	65%
		Interesting	7	35%
2	The story facilitates understanding the lesson	Very helpful	13	65%
		Helpful	6	30%
		Moderately helpful	1	5%
3	The story conveys valuable messages	Strongly agree	17	85%
		Agree	3	15%
4	The story increases interest in learning English	Strongly agree	14	70%
		Agree	6	30%
5	Motivation to learn through digital stories	Highly motivated	15	75%
		Motivated	5	25%

Across all questionnaire items, student responses were distributed within the two highest response categories, with percentages ranging from 65% to 85%, indicating positive perceptions and motivation toward learning through the digital folklore e-book.

4.2. Discussion

The Ambonese digital folklore e-book developed in this study was designed to support junior high school students' EFL reading comprehension through meaningful stories. In many EFL classrooms, learning materials remain limited, text-based, and teacher-centered, which often reduces students' interest and active participation in reading activities. Previous studies suggest that students' engagement and enthusiasm increase when learning uses story-based media that feels relevant and enjoyable (Ramadhan & Atika, 2023; Wu & Amzah, 2023). An e-book with attractive visuals and familiar narratives have also been shown to help learners stay focused and better understand texts (Kusmana et al., 2020; Nopasari et al., 2023). In response to these challenges, this digital folklore e-book integrates local Ambonese narratives with visual support to create a more engaging reading experience for EFL learners.

The expert validation results indicate that the digital folklore e-book was carefully designed and met key instructional, visual, and pedagogical standards. High scores in text organization, visual layout, and the alignment between reading tasks and learning objectives suggest that the material was not only attractive but also purposefully structured to support learning. This level of coherence reflects core principles of instructional design, which stress the importance of aligning objectives, content presentation, and assessment within a clear learning framework (Prayoga et al., 2022). Such alignment is especially critical in EFL classrooms, where learners often deal with linguistic limitations alongside cognitive demands. When materials are poorly structured, they can overwhelm learners and increase cognitive load. In contrast, coherent design helps students concentrate on understanding meaning and building comprehension (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013).

The strong integration of textual and visual elements further enhanced the instructional quality of the e-book. From a multimedia learning perspective, the combination of written narratives with relevant illustrations supports dual-channel processing and facilitates more efficient understanding (Steane, 2024; Kusmana et al., 2020). The deliberate avoidance of unnecessary visual complexity, along with visuals that directly supported the story content, likely helped reduce extraneous cognitive load. This design choice is particularly beneficial for adolescent EFL learners, who frequently struggle with unfamiliar vocabulary and sentence patterns. In addition, the reading activities progressed from literal comprehension to inferential and evaluative thinking. This progression reflects Bloom's revised taxonomy and supports the development of higher-order thinking skills (Grabe & Stoller, 2022).

The improvement in students' reading comprehension scores provides strong evidence that the digital folklore e-book effectively supported learning. Both small-scale and large-scale trials showed noticeable increases in post-test scores, with medium N-gain values indicating that these gains were educationally meaningful. These improvements can be explained through schema theory, which suggests that comprehension becomes easier when learners can connect new texts with prior knowledge and experiences (Awaludin et al., 2020). Because the stories were based on Ambonese folklore, students were likely familiar with the cultural context and underlying values. This familiarity may have reduced the effort required to understand background information in the texts. As a result, students could focus more on language processing and meaning construction, consistent with previous findings on familiar texts in EFL reading (Teng, 2020; Kholmatova, 2021).

The shift from lower to higher score categories between the pre-test and post-test further illustrates the effectiveness of the instructional approach. This pattern reflects the principles of meaning-based reading, which view reading as an interactive process involving the reader, the text, and the sociocultural context (Grabe, 2016). The digital format of the folklore e-book, supported by visuals and guided comprehension tasks, appears to have strengthened this interaction. Multimodal cues likely helped students make inferences and monitor their understanding as they read. Importantly, similar learning gains were found in both trial stages. This consistency suggests that the effectiveness of the e-book was not limited to specific classroom conditions, aligning with previous studies on digital storytelling and multimedia-supported EFL reading instruction (Wu & Amzah, 2023).

Beyond reading performance, the findings also show that the digital folklore e-book had a positive impact on students' engagement and motivation. Questionnaire results indicate that students found the stories interesting, meaningful, and helpful for learning English through digital media. The concentration of responses in the highest Likert categories suggests strong affective engagement. Such engagement is increasingly recognized as a key factor in successful and sustained language learning. According to self-determination theory, motivation is enhanced when learning experiences feel relevant, engaging, and supportive of learners' sense of competence (Ryan & Deci, 2020). The use of local folklore likely increased relevance and emotional connection, while the clear structure of the e-book helped students feel more confident in understanding the texts.

Students' positive responses to the moral values embedded in the stories further highlight the role of cultural relevance in reading engagement. Reader-response theory emphasizes that readers actively construct meaning based on their personal experiences and cultural backgrounds (Baan, 2021). When EFL learners encounter texts that reflect their own cultural values and social realities, they are more likely to engage deeply and respond thoughtfully. This emotional involvement supports reading development by encouraging persistence and strategic reading behavior. Motivation, in particular, influences learners' willingness to engage with challenging texts and sustain effort over time (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013; Munajah et al. (2023). In this study, strong motivational responses likely worked together with cognitive support to enhance overall reading comprehension outcomes (Wu & Amzah; 2023).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that a digital folklore e-book can effectively combine strong instructional design, improved reading comprehension, and high learner engagement. These results align with responsive pedagogy, which emphasizes integrating learners' cultural backgrounds into instructional materials to enhance relevance and learning effectiveness (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2021). In many EFL contexts, instructional materials are still dominated by foreign cultural content. This study therefore highlights the pedagogical value of locally grounded digital resources. Such materials not only support language development but also affirm students' cultural identities (Widodo, 2016; Steane,

2024). As shown in this study, culturally responsive digital materials can play a meaningful role in improving both cognitive and affective learning outcomes.

5. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the development of an Ambonese digital folklore e-book is an effective approach to supporting junior high school students' EFL reading comprehension while strengthening cultural relevance in learning materials. Guided by a systematic instructional design model, the e-book achieved excellent feasibility and design validity and produced meaningful improvements in students' reading performance, as indicated by consistent medium N-gain results across small- and large-scale trials. These gains suggest that integrating familiar narratives with well-structured multimodal features can reduce comprehension barriers and enhance learners' engagement with English texts. Students' positive perceptions and high motivation further indicate that local folklore presented in digital formats can foster affective involvement alongside cognitive development. Taken together, the findings confirm that a grounded digital folklore e-book can function as both effective instructional resources and carriers of local cultural values in EFL classrooms. Future research should investigate the long-term impact of digital folklore materials on reading development, explore their integration with other language skills, and examine their application across different cultural regions and technological platforms to strengthen the scalability and sustainability of responsive digital learning resources.

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