



Bridging Cultures, Boosting Reading: Effectiveness of Culture-Based Activities on ESL Learners

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Abstract

This study investigated the effectiveness of culture-based activities in enhancing reading proficiency among English as a Second Language (ESL) learners at Lapu-Lapu-Cebu International College during Academic Year 2025–2026. Specifically, it examined learners' reading proficiency before and after the implementation of culture-based activities, determined whether a significant difference existed between pretest and posttest scores, explored students' experiences during the intervention, and developed JM's Culture-Based Lesson Plan based on the findings. An embedded mixed-method research design was employed. Quantitative data were collected from 42 ESL learners using validated reading pretests and posttests, while qualitative data were obtained through a focus group discussion with 10 participants. Results revealed a significant improvement in reading proficiency after the intervention. Qualitative findings indicated that culture-based activities enhanced metacognitive awareness, increased confidence and emotional readiness to use English, strengthened cultural understanding, promoted peer collaboration, and helped learners address vocabulary and grammar challenges through structured support. Based on these findings, JM's Culture-Based Lesson Plan was developed as a pedagogical resource to support culturally responsive reading instruction and improve reading outcomes among ESL learners.

Keywords

Community needs; English teaching; Reading comprehension; Embedded mixed-method research; Philippines

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Ethics Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards.

INTRODUCTION

English language teaching has increasingly recognized that reading is not only a linguistic process but also a cultural and social experience. Learners understand texts more effectively when classroom instruction connects with their cultural background, prior knowledge, and lived experiences. According to Schema Theory, comprehension becomes more meaningful when learners relate new information to what they already know and experience culturally (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983). In the same way, culturally relevant pedagogy encourages learners to become more engaged because instruction reflects their identities and realities (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Culture also plays an important role in strengthening learner participation, inclusivity, and meaningful interaction in English language learning (Hossain, 2024). Constructivist learning perspectives further explain that learners develop understanding through active interaction, reflection, and experience

(Cariaga, 2025). These ideas suggest that culture-based activities can create more meaningful and engaging learning experiences for ESL students, particularly in reading instruction.

In many ESL classrooms, learners experience difficulty in reading because instructional materials and classroom activities are often disconnected from their cultural experiences. Reading comprehension improves when learners are exposed to culturally familiar texts and meaningful classroom interactions (Valerozo & Aggabao, 2020). Language learning also becomes more effective through collaborative and socially mediated learning experiences where students construct understanding with others (Alkhudiry, 2022; Mirzaee & Maftoon, 2016). Similarly, scaffolding strategies grounded in sociocultural theory help improve learner participation and language achievement (Sarmiento-Campos et al., 2022). Reflective learning activities further encourage learners to express ideas, connect experiences, and participate actively in classroom discussions (Sudirman et al., 2021). Student-centered learning approaches have likewise been found to increase learner interest and engagement in classroom activities (Sarsale & Langub, 2023). These studies emphasize that reading instruction becomes more effective when learners are given opportunities to interact, reflect, and connect learning with their cultural realities.

Recent studies also highlight the importance of learner-responsive instructional strategies in improving reading comprehension and language development. Vocabulary learning and comprehension improve when learners are supported through glossing techniques and multimedia learning materials (Azizi et al., 2022; Boers, 2022; Wang & Lee, 2021). Learning materials that match learners' proficiency levels also help reduce cognitive difficulty and improve language acquisition (Li et al., 2025). However, emotional factors such as anxiety may negatively affect learners' participation and performance in language classrooms (Cheng et al., 1999). Classroom conditions and learning environments also influence students' motivation, engagement, and adaptation to ESL learning experiences (Rosario, 2026; Oliveres et al., 2026). Furthermore, effective instructional tools and adaptive learning practices contribute to improved understanding and learning resilience among students (Fabros & Ibañez, 2023; Cariaga et al., 2025; Timbol, 2026). These findings indicate that supportive, engaging, and culturally responsive classroom practices are essential in developing learners' reading comprehension and confidence in ESL instruction.

Despite the growing number of studies on culturally responsive instruction and learner-centered teaching, limited research has explored the effectiveness of culture-based activities in teaching reading among ESL learners using a mixed-methods approach. Existing studies often focus only on measurable learning outcomes or solely on learners' experiences without combining both perspectives. Educational challenges in culturally diverse learning environments continue to highlight the need for inclusive and responsive teaching approaches that recognize learner diversity and classroom realities (Augusto et al., 2026; Cariaga et al., 2025). Hence, this study seeks to explore the effectiveness of culture-based activities in teaching reading among ESL students through an Embedded Mixed-Method Design. By examining both students' reading performance and their lived experiences, the study aims to contribute to more meaningful, inclusive, and culturally responsive ESL instruction.

METHODOLOGY

Design

This study employed an Embedded Mixed-Method Design to determine the effectiveness of culture-based activities in enhancing the reading skills of ESL students. The study primarily utilized a quantitative pretest-posttest approach to measure changes in students' reading proficiency before and after the intervention, while qualitative data were gathered to support and explain the quantitative findings. A validated 25-item multiple-choice reading test was administered as both pretest and posttest, and the results were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, including mean, standard deviation, and paired sample t-test, to determine significant differences in scores. To strengthen the validity of the findings, qualitative data were collected through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), allowing students to share their experiences, perceptions, and insights regarding the use of culture-based activities in reading instruction. The integration of quantitative and qualitative data provided a more comprehensive understanding of how culture-based activities influenced both the measurable reading performance and lived experiences of ESL learners.

Locale

This study was conducted at the Center for English Language Studies (CELS) department of Lapulapu-Cebu International College (LCIC) located in Barangay Bankal, Lapu-Lapu City, Cebu. The institution offers various academic programs and serves both local and international learners, particularly students studying English as a second language. The CELS department is known for providing internationally aligned English language instruction facilitated by licensed and experienced language educators. Since the department caters to students from different Asian countries, the learning environment is culturally diverse and multilingual, making it an appropriate setting for the implementation of culture-based instructional activities. The researcher's experience teaching in the department further provided valuable classroom observations regarding the reading difficulties and cultural learning needs of ESL students, which strengthened the relevance of the study.

Participants

This study employed purposive sampling to select participants who could meaningfully engage in the culture-based reading intervention and complete all phases of the study. The participants consisted of 42 ESL students enrolled in a long-term English course at LCIC. To ensure consistency and relevance to the research objectives, participants were selected based on specific criteria, including continuous enrollment in the program, English proficiency levels ranging from A2 to C1, and regular attendance during the intervention period. For the qualitative component, ten students were purposively selected through extreme case sampling, consisting of the five highest and five lowest pretest scorers. This selection allowed the study to capture diverse learner experiences and perspectives regarding the implementation of culture-based activities in reading

instruction. The use of purposive sampling ensured that participants could provide meaningful quantitative data and rich qualitative insights aligned with the objectives of the study.

Instrument

This study utilized two primary research instruments: a validated 25-item multiple-choice reading test and a semi-structured Focus Group Discussion (FGD) guide. The reading test served as the quantitative instrument used to measure the participants' reading proficiency before and after the implementation of the culture-based intervention. The scores gathered from the pretest and posttest were analyzed using statistical tools to determine significant changes in reading performance. Meanwhile, the semi-structured interview guide served as the qualitative instrument designed to explore the students' experiences, perceptions, challenges, and suggestions regarding the culture-based activities. The guide contained open-ended questions that encouraged participants to discuss how the intervention influenced their learning, confidence, motivation, and reading experiences. Both instruments underwent expert validation by English language education specialists to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the objectives of the study.

Procedure

The data-gathering procedure was conducted in three phases: pre-data gathering, actual data gathering, and post-data gathering. During the pre-data gathering phase, the researcher secured formal approval from the institution and prepared the validated research instruments and informed consent forms for the participants. In the actual data gathering phase, the validated 25-item reading test was first administered as a pretest to the 42 ESL students under standardized conditions. Following this, the culture-based intervention was implemented over eight instructional sessions that integrated activities such as reflective journaling, cultural sharing, peer collaboration, and culturally relevant reading tasks. After the intervention, the same reading test was administered as a posttest to measure changes in reading proficiency. For the qualitative component, Focus Group Discussions were conducted with ten purposively selected participants to gather deeper insights into their learning experiences. In the post-data gathering phase, the quantitative data were encoded and statistically analyzed, while the qualitative data were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis. All collected data were securely stored, and participant confidentiality was strictly observed throughout the research process.

Data Analysis

The This study utilized both quantitative and qualitative data analysis techniques to determine the effectiveness of culture-based activities in improving ESL students' reading skills. For the quantitative component, descriptive statistics such as mean, standard deviation, and percentage were used to summarize the students' pretest and posttest scores, while a paired sample t-test was employed to determine whether significant differences existed between the two sets of scores at a significance level of $p < 0.05$. Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS software with the guidance of a certified statistician. For the qualitative component, the data gathered from the Focus Group Discussions were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework, which involved transcription, coding, theme generation, review, and interpretation of the participants' responses. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings allowed the study to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how culture-based activities influenced students' reading development and classroom experiences.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to the ethical principles of beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, and autonomy to ensure the protection and welfare of all participants. The study aimed to contribute positively to ESL instruction by providing insights into effective culture-based teaching strategies while ensuring that participants were protected from any form of physical, emotional, or psychological harm. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was secured from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were informed of their rights, including the right to refuse participation or withdraw from the study at any point without consequences. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained by using coded labels instead of participants' names and securely storing all research data in password-protected digital formats accessible only to the researcher. Furthermore, the study ensured fairness by selecting participants based solely on the research criteria regardless of nationality, religion, or ethnicity, thereby promoting ethical and inclusive research practices throughout the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the students' pretest scores in reading before the implementation of the culture-based activities. The mean percentage score (MPS) of 73.9% indicates that the students' reading proficiency was below the 75% mastery level, suggesting that many learners still experienced difficulties in reading comprehension prior to the intervention. The standard deviation of 3.52 further shows variability in the students' performance, indicating differences in reading proficiency levels among the participants. These findings imply the need for instructional approaches that can support learners with varying reading abilities while increasing engagement and comprehension. Research suggests that culturally responsive instruction enhances learner participation and understanding because students are able to connect reading materials with familiar cultural experiences (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Similarly, Schema Theory explains that comprehension improves when learners activate prior knowledge and cultural background while interpreting texts (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983). Hossain (2024) also emphasized that culture-based learning environments strengthen learner motivation and participation in English language learning. These findings support the need for culture-based activities as an intervention to address the students' reading difficulties and improve comprehension among ESL learners.

Table 1
 Students' Reading Skill Level in English Before Using the Culture-Based Activities

Descriptive Statistics	Pretest Results
N (Number of Students)	42
Highest Score	24
Lowest Score	8
Mean	18.48
Standard Deviation	3.52
Mean Percentage Score (MPS)	73.9%

Table 2 presents the students' posttest scores after the implementation of the culture-based activities. The results show a mean percentage score (MPS) of 89.9%, which indicates a high level of mastery in reading comprehension after the intervention. The mean score of 22.48 and the low standard deviation of 1.26 suggest that most students performed consistently well and that the differences in learners' performance became smaller after exposure to the intervention. These findings imply that the culture-based activities positively influenced the students' reading proficiency and helped improve overall classroom performance. The results support previous studies emphasizing that learner-centered and culturally responsive instructional approaches improve student engagement and academic achievement (Sarsale & Langub, 2023). Reflective and culturally meaningful learning activities also strengthen participation and comprehension because learners become more motivated and emotionally engaged in the learning process (Sudirman et al., 2021). In addition, Valerozo and Aggabao (2020) found that culture-based texts improve reading comprehension by allowing students to connect reading content with their own experiences and cultural backgrounds. These findings indicate that integrating culture-based activities into reading instruction can significantly enhance ESL learners' comprehension skills and classroom participation.

Table 2
 Students' Reading Skill Level in English After Using the Culture-Based Activities

Descriptive Statistics	Posttest Results
N (Number of Students)	42
Highest Score	24
Lowest Score	20
Mean	22.48
Standard Deviation	1.26
Mean Percentage Score (MPS)	89.9%

Table 3 presents the paired sample t-test results used to determine whether a significant difference existed between the students' pretest and posttest scores after the implementation of the culture-based activities. The computed p-value of 0.000 is lower than the 0.05 level of significance, indicating that there is a statistically significant difference between the students' reading performance before and after the intervention. Therefore, the null hypothesis stating that there is no significant difference in the students' reading skill level before and after the use of culture-based activities is rejected. The increase in the mean score from 18.61 to 22.49 demonstrates that the intervention contributed positively to the students' reading development. The lower posttest variance also suggests that the intervention reduced performance gaps among learners and promoted more consistent achievement. These findings support sociocultural learning perspectives which emphasize that meaningful and culturally responsive learning experiences improve language acquisition and comprehension (Alkhudiry, 2022; Mirzaee & Maftoon, 2016). Scaffolding and collaborative learning strategies grounded in sociocultural theory also contribute to improved learner performance and participation (Sarmiento-Campos et al., 2022). Furthermore, culture-based instruction helps learners connect reading materials with familiar experiences, making reading more meaningful and accessible (Hossain, 2024). The results therefore suggest that culture-based activities are effective instructional tools for improving ESL learners' reading proficiency and promoting more inclusive learning experiences.

Table 3
 Significant Difference in the Students' Reading Skill Level Before and After Using the Culture-Based Activities

Statistics	Pretest	Posttest
Mean	18.61	22.49
Variance	8.29	1.56
Observations	42	42
Pearson Correlation	0.56	
t Stat	-10.26	
t Critical two-tail	2.02	
P(T ≤ t) two-tail	0.000	

Table 4 presents the qualitative findings regarding the students' experiences with the implementation of culture-based reading activities. Through thematic analysis of the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), seven major themes emerged that explain how the intervention influenced the learners' reading experiences, emotional development, cultural awareness, and classroom participation. The findings revealed that reflective journaling helped students develop self-awareness, emotional

reflection, and deeper connections between their personal experiences and the reading texts. Students also reported vocabulary and grammar difficulties, particularly with unfamiliar cultural terms, highlighting the need for instructional scaffolding and contextualized language support. Despite these challenges, many learners expressed increased confidence and reduced anxiety in using English because the activities allowed them to share meaningful cultural experiences in supportive classroom environments. The participants further emphasized that the culture-based activities strengthened their appreciation of Filipino culture and increased their awareness of cultural similarities and differences among learners from various nationalities. Peer discussions also promoted collaboration, comprehension, and social integration because students learned from one another through shared explanations and cultural exchanges. These findings support the idea that collaborative and socially mediated learning environments improve language learning and comprehension (Alkhudiry, 2022; Mirzaee & Maftoon, 2016). Reflective and student-centered learning activities also encourage learner engagement, self-awareness, and meaningful participation in language classrooms (Sudirman et al., 2021; Sarsale & Langub, 2023). Furthermore, culturally responsive instruction helps learners connect academic content with their identities and lived experiences, resulting in greater confidence, inclusivity, and motivation in learning English (Hossain, 2024; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Overall, the qualitative findings reinforced the quantitative results by showing that culture-based activities positively influenced not only the students' reading proficiency but also their emotional readiness, cultural understanding, and engagement in ESL learning.

Table 4
Experiences of the Students with the Culture-Based Activities

Themes	Codes	Sample Vignette
Theme 1: Reflective Journaling Enhances Self-Awareness and Meaning-Making	emotional reflection; metacognitive awareness; cultural identity connection	"I love to express my emotions in writing. And I could go back and read it again."
Theme 2: Vocabulary and Grammar Challenges Highlight Linguistic Gaps	unfamiliar vocabulary; grammar differences; translation reliance	"Sometimes the words were hard—especially the old or cultural ones."
Theme 3: Growing Confidence and Emotional Readiness to Use English	reduced anxiety; self-efficacy; peer support	"I was thrilled... I felt proud to talk about my culture."
Theme 4: Strengthened Cultural Awareness and Appreciation	cultural comparison; respect for diversity; value recognition	"The stories taught me Filipino values such as respect and family."
Theme 5: Peer Discussions Promote Collaboration and Comprehension	collaborative learning; peer explanation; social integration	"Sometimes I didn't understand, but when someone explained it, it became clear."
Theme 6: Personal and National Identity Development	identity negotiation; cultural belonging; openness	"There's no cultural barrier."
Theme 7: Evaluation and Suggestions for Improvement	positive evaluation; need for scaffolding; multimodal support	"Maybe the teacher can explain more about the culture before we start reading."

Table 5 summarizes the students' experiences with the implementation of culture-based reading activities. The qualitative findings revealed that the intervention positively influenced learners' emotional, social, cultural, and academic development. Reflective journaling enabled students to become more self-aware and emotionally expressive, while peer discussions promoted collaborative learning and deeper comprehension of reading materials. Although students experienced challenges related to vocabulary and grammar, they were able to cope through peer support, teacher guidance, and contextualized learning experiences. The findings also showed that culture-based activities increased learners' confidence, reduced anxiety, and strengthened their willingness to communicate in English. Furthermore, the activities promoted cultural appreciation and helped students develop respect for cultural diversity and personal identity. These findings align with sociocultural learning perspectives which emphasize that meaningful interaction and culturally responsive instruction support language acquisition and learner engagement (Alkhudiry, 2022; Mirzaee & Maftoon, 2016). Reflective and student-centered activities likewise contribute to increased learner participation, self-awareness, and confidence in language learning environments (Sudirman et al., 2021; Sarsale & Langub, 2023). In addition, culturally relevant pedagogy encourages learners to connect academic content with their identities and lived experiences, making learning more meaningful and inclusive (Hossain, 2024; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Overall, the qualitative findings support the quantitative results by demonstrating that culture-based activities positively influenced students' reading development, engagement, cultural understanding, and emotional readiness in ESL learning.

Table 5
Summary of the Students' Experiences with the Culture-Based Activities

Themes	Interpretation
Reflective Journaling Enhances Self-Awareness and Meaning-Making	Students developed deeper reflection, emotional awareness, and personal connection to reading through journaling activities.
Vocabulary and Grammar Challenges Highlight Linguistic Gaps	Learners encountered difficulties with unfamiliar vocabulary, grammar structures, and cultural expressions, showing the need for scaffolding and language support.
Growing Confidence and Emotional Readiness to Use English	Students became more confident, less anxious, and more willing to communicate in English after participating in the culture-based activities.
Strengthened Cultural Awareness and Appreciation	The activities increased learners' appreciation of Filipino culture while helping them understand similarities and differences among cultures.
Peer Discussions Promote Collaboration and Comprehension	Collaborative discussions improved comprehension, encouraged peer learning, and strengthened social interaction among students.

Themes	Interpretation
Personal and National Identity Development	Students reflected more deeply on their own cultural identities while becoming more open and respectful toward other cultures.
Evaluation and Suggestions for Improvement	Learners positively evaluated the intervention but recommended additional scaffolding, visual aids, and clearer cultural explanations to further improve understanding.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of the study confirmed that culture-based activities significantly improved the reading proficiency of ESL students at Lapulapu–Cebu International College during the Academic Year 2025–2026. The significant increase in the students' posttest scores demonstrated that integrating culturally relevant reading materials, reflective journaling, peer discussions, and cultural sharing activities positively influenced learners' comprehension skills and engagement in reading instruction. Moreover, the qualitative findings revealed that the intervention strengthened students' confidence, cultural awareness, self-expression, collaboration, and emotional readiness to use English. These results suggest that culture-based instruction does not only support academic development but also creates a more inclusive, meaningful, and learner-centered ESL learning environment where students can connect language learning with their identities and lived experiences.

Based on the findings of the study, ESL teachers are encouraged to integrate culture-based activities into reading instruction to enhance learners' comprehension, engagement, and intercultural understanding. Teachers may incorporate culturally relevant texts, reflective journaling, peer collaboration, and vocabulary scaffolding strategies to support learners with varying proficiency levels and cultural backgrounds. Educational institutions and curriculum planners may also provide training and develop culturally responsive instructional materials that promote inclusive and meaningful language learning experiences. Furthermore, future researchers are encouraged to conduct similar studies in different ESL contexts, extend the duration of the intervention, or explore the effectiveness of culture-based activities in other language skills such as writing, speaking, and listening to further strengthen the understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy in language education.

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