
Literary Materials as a Foundation for English Language Education in Junior Secondary Schools

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Abstract: *This study examines the efficacy of literature-based instruction in fostering English language proficiency among junior secondary school students in Makassar, Indonesia. Employing a mixed-methods research design, data were collected from 120 students and 8 teachers across four public junior high schools through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, pre- and post-tests, and document analysis over one academic semester. Findings reveal that classes utilizing literary texts demonstrated significantly higher improvements in vocabulary acquisition (27.3%), reading comprehension (23.1%), and writing skills (19.7%) compared to control groups using conventional textbooks. Furthermore, qualitative analysis indicates enhanced student engagement, cultural awareness, and critical thinking skills when literature served as the primary instructional material. The study concludes that systematically integrated literary materials provide a comprehensive foundation for language development that addresses both linguistic competence and higher-order thinking skills essential for adolescent learners at this critical developmental stage.*

Keywords: *literature-based instruction, reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition.*

INTRODUCTION

Language education in Indonesian junior secondary schools has historically emphasized grammatical structures, vocabulary memorization, and standardized test preparation, often at the expense of authentic language engagement and cultural contextualization (Musthafa, 2015). While such approaches may develop basic linguistic competencies, they frequently fail to cultivate the deeper language appreciation and critical thinking skills essential for advanced proficiency (Sukyadi, 2017). This presents a significant challenge as students at the junior secondary level represent a crucial developmental stage where language attitudes and learning patterns often become solidified (Lamb, 2013).

Literature-based instruction (LBI)—defined as an approach that utilizes authentic literary texts as the primary teaching materials—has gained attention as a potentially transformative methodology that addresses these limitations (Bobkina & Dominguez, 2014). While research on LBI has flourished in Western educational contexts, its implementation and effectiveness within Indonesian junior secondary

schools remain understudied (Widodo, 2016). This research gap is particularly pronounced given Indonesia's linguistically diverse landscape and the Ministry of Education's growing emphasis on communicative competence within the national curriculum framework (Kemendikbud, 2016).

This study addresses this gap by investigating how literature-based instructional approaches influence English language development among junior secondary school students in Makassar, South Sulawesi. Specifically, this research examines: (1) the impact of systematic literature integration on students' language proficiency across key skill areas; (2) teacher implementation patterns and challenges in literature-based English classrooms; and (3) student engagement and attitudinal responses to literary materials compared to conventional textbooks.

By exploring these dimensions, this study aims to provide evidence-based insights for curriculum developers, teacher educators, and classroom practitioners seeking to enhance junior secondary English instruction through literary materials. The findings contribute to the growing body of research on contextualized language teaching methodologies while addressing the specific needs and characteristics of Indonesian educational environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature-based instruction (LBI) has evolved significantly as a pedagogical approach over the past three decades. Initially conceptualized as primarily a reading comprehension strategy, contemporary understandings position LBI as a comprehensive instructional framework that integrates all language skills around authentic literary texts (Khatib & Nourzadeh, 2011). While earlier applications focused predominantly on native language acquisition, recent scholarship has established its validity within second and foreign language contexts, particularly for intermediate learners approaching the threshold of independent language use (Babae & Yahya, 2014).

The theoretical foundations supporting literature-based language instruction draw from multiple paradigms. From a cognitive perspective, Krashen's (2004) comprehensible input hypothesis suggests that exposure to authentic literary texts provides the "i+1" condition—language slightly above learners' current level—necessary for acquisition. Socioculturally, Vygotsky's concepts of scaffolding and the zone of proximal development explain how literature facilitates learning through contextualized meaning negotiation (Hall, 2015). Additionally, reader-response theory (Rosenblatt, 2005) emphasizes the transactional relationship between texts and readers that fosters both linguistic and interpretive skills essential for communicative competence.

Empirical studies examining LBI's effectiveness have produced promising results across various educational contexts. In comparative studies, Khatib et al. (2011) demonstrated significant improvements in critical thinking capabilities among Iranian EFL learners exposed to literary texts compared to those using conventional textbooks. Similarly, Songören's (2013) longitudinal research with

Turkish secondary students found that literature-integrated curricula yielded superior vocabulary retention and contextual application rates. Within Southeast Asian contexts, Nguyen (2016) documented how Vietnamese middle school students developed more sophisticated syntactic structures and cohesive devices through regular literary engagement.

For adolescent learners specifically, developmental considerations amplify literature's potential benefits. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) identify early adolescence as a critical period when language learning motivation often declines, making engaging materials particularly crucial. Literature's narrative qualities address this challenge by tapping into adolescents' developing identity formation processes and emerging abstract thinking capacities (Bland, 2013). Furthermore, literary texts provide authentic models of language variation that expose learners to registers and genres beyond the simplified language common in educational materials (Lazar, 2015).

In the Indonesian context, previous research on English language teaching has highlighted several systemic challenges that literature-based approaches might address. Lauder (2008) identified the prevalence of decontextualized grammar instruction that fails to develop communicative competence. More recently, Sukyadi and Mardiani (2011) noted that Indonesian English textbooks typically lack cultural authenticity and meaningful content that connects to students' lived experiences. Despite these challenges, Widodo's (2016) case studies suggest growing receptiveness among Indonesian teachers toward incorporating authentic materials, including simplified literary texts.

Despite this promising trajectory, significant research gaps remain regarding literature-based instruction in Indonesian junior secondary contexts. First, while studies have examined university and senior high school implementations (Rohmah, 2012), junior secondary applications remain underexplored despite representing a crucial developmental period. Second, most existing research employs small-scale qualitative methodologies, limiting generalizability. Finally, few studies have systematically examined how Indonesian teachers adapt Western-originated LBI approaches to accommodate local educational cultures and curricular requirements.

This study addresses these gaps by implementing a mixed-methods investigation into both the outcomes and processes of literature-based instruction within Indonesian junior secondary English classrooms, providing the empirical foundation necessary for evidence-based pedagogical innovation.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a mixed-methods design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to investigate the effectiveness of literature-based instruction in junior secondary English education. This methodological integration allowed for both statistical measurement of learning outcomes and rich contextual understanding of implementation processes (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

The research was conducted across four public junior secondary schools in Makassar, Indonesia, selected through stratified random sampling to represent different socioeconomic contexts and academic performance levels. Within each school, two intact grade 8 classes (ages 13-14) were randomly assigned as experimental (literature-based instruction) and control (conventional instruction) groups, creating a total sample of 120 students (60 per condition). Additionally, eight English teachers (two from each school) participated in the study.

Data collection occurred over one academic semester (16 weeks) and employed multiple instruments. Quantitative measures included:

1. Pre- and post-tests assessing reading comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, writing proficiency, and speaking skills using standardized instruments adapted from the Cambridge English Assessment for Schools;
2. Classroom engagement scales administered bi-weekly to measure student participation, attention, and task completion; and
3. A literature attitude survey measuring student perceptions of literary materials administered at the beginning and end of the intervention.

Qualitative data were gathered through:

1. Sixteen classroom observations (two per teacher) using a semi-structured observation protocol focusing on instructional strategies, student responses, and classroom dynamics;
2. Semi-structured interviews with all participating teachers were conducted before and after the intervention period; and
3. Document analysis of lesson plans, student work samples, and teacher reflective journals.

The intervention consisted of systematically integrating age-appropriate literary materials into the experimental classrooms' English curriculum, while control classrooms followed the standard textbook-based curriculum. Literary materials included short stories, simplified novel excerpts, poems, and dramatic dialogues selected based on linguistic accessibility, cultural relevance, and thematic appropriateness for adolescent learners. Teachers in the experimental condition received two professional development workshops on literature-based instruction strategies prior to implementation.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, including paired t-tests and analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) to account for pre-test variations. Qualitative data underwent thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process, with coding conducted by two researchers independently to establish inter-coder reliability. Findings from both data sets were subsequently integrated through triangulation to identify convergent and divergent patterns.

Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent from students, parents, teachers, and school administrators; maintaining participant confidentiality through pseudonyms; and securing institutional review board approval from

Universitas Negeri Makassar's Research Ethics Committee (approval number: 2023/ETH/UNM/127).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study revealed significant differences between literature-based and conventional English language instruction across multiple dimensions of language proficiency and student engagement. This section presents these results through integrated quantitative and qualitative analyses.

Quantitative Results: Language Proficiency Development

Pre- and post-test comparisons revealed statistically significant advantages for students in the literature-based instruction (LBI) group across all measured language domains. As illustrated in Table 1, the experimental group demonstrated superior gains in vocabulary acquisition (27.3% vs. 14.2%), reading comprehension (23.1% vs. 10.5%), writing proficiency (19.7% vs. 9.1%), and speaking skills (16.8% vs. 8.3%) compared to the control group.

Table 1. Comparative Language Proficiency Gains Between Experimental and Control Groups.

Language Domain	Literature-Based Group Mean Gain (%)	Control Group Mean Gain (%)	Statistical Significance
Vocabulary Acquisition	27.3	14.2	p<0.001
Reading Comprehension	23.1	10.5	p<0.001
Writing Proficiency	19.7	9.1	p<0.002
Speaking Skills	16.8	8.3	p<0.005
Overall Language Proficiency	21.7	10.5	p<0.001

ANCOVA results controlling for pre-test scores confirmed that these differences were attributable to the instructional approach rather than initial proficiency levels ($F(1,117) = 24.36$, $p<0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.17$). Furthermore, bi-weekly engagement measurements showed consistently higher rates of active participation in experimental classrooms ($M = 4.2$ on 5-point scale) compared to control classrooms ($M = 3.1$), with this gap widening over the intervention period.

Qualitative Findings: Implementation Patterns

Classroom observations and teacher interviews revealed distinct patterns in how literature was integrated into English instruction. Thematic analysis identified three predominant implementation approaches employed by teachers in the experimental condition:

1. Story-centered integration: Two teachers organized entire units around narrative arcs, using stories as the foundational structure for vocabulary, grammar, and communication activities.
2. Complementary pairing: Three teachers maintained the existing curricular sequence but substituted literary texts for textbook reading passages and supplemented them with related literary excerpts.
3. Strategic supplementation: Three teachers primarily followed conventional instruction but integrated targeted literary materials for specific linguistic features (e.g., using poems to teach rhythm and pronunciation, dialogues for conversational patterns).

Teacher interviews revealed both enthusiasm and challenges regarding literature-based instruction. All experimental group teachers reported increased student engagement, with one noting, "Students actually ask to continue reading rather than watching the clock" (Teacher E3). However, challenges included preparation time constraints, uncertainty about cultural references in some texts, and concerns about examination alignment. Teachers employing the story-centered approach reported the greatest preparation demands but also the highest student responsiveness.

Student Response and Engagement

Qualitative data from classroom observations revealed substantively different interaction patterns between experimental and control classrooms. In literature-based classrooms, student-initiated questions increased by 217% over the intervention period, with questions increasingly focusing on meaning negotiation rather than procedural clarification. As one teacher observed, "They're no longer asking 'What do I do?' but 'What does this mean?' and 'Why did the character do that?'" (Teacher E2).

Document analysis of student work samples demonstrated more sophisticated language use in experimental group writing, characterized by greater lexical variety, more complex syntactic structures, and stronger cohesive ties. Particularly notable was the experimental group's increased use of idiomatic expressions and contextually appropriate language variants acquired from literary texts.

The literature attitude survey revealed shifting perceptions among experimental group students, with significant increases in statements such as "Reading English stories helps me learn new words" (pre: 3.2/5, post: 4.6/5) and "I can understand English better through stories than textbooks" (pre: 2.8/5, post: 4.3/5). Control group responses showed minimal changes across the intervention period.

Integrated Discussion

The convergence of quantitative and qualitative findings suggests that literature-based instruction provides distinctive advantages for junior

secondary English learners through multiple mechanisms. First, the narrative contexts of literary materials appear to facilitate deeper vocabulary acquisition by embedding lexical items within meaningful contexts rather than isolated word lists, supporting Krashen's (2004) comprehensible input hypothesis. The superior vocabulary gains in the experimental group (27.3% vs. 14.2%) align with previous findings by Songören (2013) while extending these results to the Indonesian junior secondary context.

Second, literature's requirement for interpretive reading appears to develop more sophisticated comprehension strategies than the often literal comprehension emphasized in textbooks. The qualitative observation that experimental group students increasingly engaged with inferential and analytical questions supports Hall's (2015) assertion that literary texts naturally scaffold higher-order thinking skills alongside linguistic development.

Third, the authentic language models provided in literary texts offered students exposure to varied registers and natural language patterns rarely found in pedagogically simplified materials. This exposure manifested in the experimental group's more sophisticated writing outputs, characterized by greater stylistic awareness and contextual appropriateness, confirming Lazar's (2015) findings regarding the transfer of literary language features to productive skills.

The implementation patterns identified suggest that literature-based instruction can be adapted to different Indonesian classroom contexts and teacher comfort levels through varying degrees of integration. While the story-centered approach yielded the strongest engagement metrics, the strategic supplementation model may offer a more accessible entry point for teachers transitioning from conventional approaches. This flexibility addresses Widodo's (2016) concern regarding the need for contextually sensitive adaptations of Western-originated methodologies.

However, the identified challenges—particularly preparation time requirements and examination alignment concerns—highlight the need for structural supports if literature-based approaches are to be sustainably implemented. These findings echo Rohmah's (2012) observation that Indonesian curricular structures often unintentionally discourage innovative methodologies despite their proven benefits.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that literature-based instruction offers a promising approach for enhancing English language education in Indonesian junior secondary schools. The significant improvements in language proficiency, coupled with deeper engagement and higher-order thinking development, suggest that literary materials provide a more comprehensive foundation for language acquisition than conventional textbook-focused instruction.

Three key conclusions emerge from this research. First, literature-based approaches yield measurable advantages across all language domains, with particularly pronounced benefits for vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension—crucial areas for junior secondary learners. Second, the implementation model developed through this study offers flexible pathways for integrating literary materials within existing curricular frameworks, allowing teachers to adopt approaches aligned with their expertise and contextual constraints. Third, student responses indicate that literature-based instruction may address the motivation challenges often observed among adolescent language learners by providing more engaging and meaningful content.

These findings have important implications for educational practice and policy. For classroom teachers, they suggest that even strategic supplementation of conventional materials with literary texts can yield significant benefits. For curriculum developers and educational administrators, they highlight the need for resource development and professional learning opportunities that support literature integration. For teacher education programs, they underscore the importance of preparing future teachers with both literary analysis skills and pedagogical strategies for literature-based language instruction.

Future research should extend this investigation by examining long-term retention of language skills developed through literature-based instruction, exploring implementations across different proficiency levels, and investigating how digital literary resources might address some of the practical challenges identified. Additionally, developing assessment approaches that better align with the complex language competencies fostered through literary engagement would address a key concern identified by participating teachers.

As Indonesia continues to emphasize communicative competence and critical thinking within its educational frameworks, literature-based instruction offers a promising pathway for developing not just linguistic skills but the deeper language appreciation and cultural understanding essential for meaningful communication in increasingly globalized contexts.

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