

Exploring Needs for Folktale-Integrated English Materials: Enhancing Oral Proficiency, Learner Independence, and Cultural Understanding

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Abstract

The integration of local folktales into English language teaching is a culturally responsive approach that supports language skills while fostering learners' identity and intercultural awareness. Developing such materials, however, requires a clear understanding of teacher and learner needs to ensure relevance and effectiveness. This study explores the specific needs of junior high school 61 teachers in designing folktale-based English learning materials that promote speaking proficiency, learner autonomy, and cultural awareness. Using a qualitative case study within a research and development (R&D) framework, the study applied the 3D model (Define, Design, Develop), adapted from Thiagarajan, Semmel, and Semmel's Four-D model. Data were collected through questionnaires, document analysis (curriculum, syllabus, lesson plans, and existing teaching materials), and fieldwork involving English teachers, who are also postgraduate students at Universitas Terbuka, and junior high school learners from schools across western, central, and eastern Indonesia. Descriptive statistics and content analysis were used to examine preferences, challenges, and expectations regarding folktale-based materials. Findings indicate three major needs: (1) interactive and accessible materials to strengthen speaking practice, (2) tasks that foster autonomy through reflective and collaborative learning, and (3) integration of cultural elements that connect local identity with global perspectives. These insights inform the development of prototypes such as folktale-based modules and flashcards that are both contextually relevant and pedagogically sound. The study contributes empirical evidence to English language education by demonstrating how needs analysis can guide the creation of culturally grounded materials that integrate language skills, learner autonomy, and cultural awareness.

Keywords:

cultural-based pedagogy;
learner-centered
Materials;
oral communication
skills;
Independent learning
strategies;
Intercultural competence

1. Introduction

Integrating local cultural elements into English language teaching has long been recognized as an effective strategy to enhance students' engagement and learning outcomes. One of the most powerful resources in this approach is the use of folktales, which carry rich cultural narratives that can support the development of language skills while promoting learners' intercultural competence. The integration of folktales into English language instruction is particularly important in diverse educational contexts like Indonesia, where learners benefit from materials that connect to their local identity and cultural heritage. However, despite the potential of such an approach, there is still a lack of clarity on how to design and implement effective folktale-based English learning materials that meet the needs of both teachers and learners. Understanding these needs is critical to creating materials that not only support language acquisition but also foster learner autonomy and cultural awareness.

The importance of adapting educational materials to the cultural context of learners has been widely recognized in the field of language education (Sánchez & Walker, 2021). Recent studies emphasize that culturally relevant teaching materials can lead to better learning outcomes, particularly when they promote a connection between the learners' cultural identities and the language being taught (Harris, 2022). Folktales, as integral components of local culture, provide a unique opportunity to explore the intersection of language learning and cultural understanding. Therefore, exploring how these folktales can be integrated into English language teaching materials, specifically those aimed at enhancing speaking proficiency and promoting learner autonomy, is essential for advancing educational practices that are both pedagogically sound and culturally grounded.

The use of culture in language learning has garnered significant attention in recent years. Numerous studies have demonstrated that cultural integration in language teaching supports not only language skills but also students' broader cognitive and social development (Lee & Alonzo, 2021). In the case of folktales, their application in the classroom has been shown to enhance oral communication skills by providing learners with a meaningful context for speaking and listening (Yates & Jiang, 2020). Folktales encourage storytelling, a practice that has been linked to improved fluency, vocabulary retention, and narrative competence (Graham, 2023). Moreover, by exploring the themes and values embedded in these tales, students develop deeper cultural awareness and gain insights into the worldviews of others (Tan & Smith, 2022).

In terms of learner autonomy, recent research has highlighted the importance of tasks that encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning. Such tasks include reflective activities, collaborative projects, and peer discussions, all of which foster a sense of ownership and motivation (Benson, 2021). Folktales provide an ideal medium for these types of activities, as they offer ample opportunities for students to engage in critical thinking, make connections between personal experiences and the narrative, and work collaboratively with their peers. By engaging with folktales, learners can explore the relationship between their local cultural identity and the global community, further supporting the development of intercultural competence (Chang, 2023).

The growing emphasis on intercultural competence in language education has led to the recognition of folktales as effective tools for bridging local cultures with global perspectives. Studies show that exposure to different cultures through storytelling helps learners develop empathy and the ability to navigate cultural differences (Foley, 2021). This is particularly important in today's globalized world, where the ability to communicate across cultures is an essential skill. Folktales, with their rich cultural content, provide a natural avenue for students to engage in intercultural learning while simultaneously improving their language proficiency (Chung & Kim, 2022).

Despite the proven benefits of incorporating cultural materials such as folktales into language teaching, there remains a gap in the research on how to systematically integrate these materials into curricula and develop them into effective instructional tools. Much of the existing literature focuses on theoretical discussions about the benefits of cultural integration, but few studies have explored the practicalities of designing, implementing, and evaluating such materials in the classroom (Miller & Lin, 2020).

While there is a wealth of research on the general advantages of using cultural materials in language instruction, there is limited focus on the specific needs of teachers and students when developing and utilizing folktale-based resources for language learning. Previous studies have often addressed the theoretical benefits of integrating culture into language education but have overlooked the practical challenges that educators face when designing culturally relevant teaching materials (Ming & Zhang, 2021). As a result, there is a need for more research that focuses on the needs and preferences of both teachers and students in designing folktale-based English materials, ensuring that these materials align with the local educational context and promote the desired learning outcomes.

Additionally, although folktales are widely recognized for their cultural and educational value, few studies have investigated how to adapt these narratives to suit the diverse proficiency levels of learners. Research on differentiated instruction, particularly in the context of folktale-based tasks, is scarce, making it difficult to understand how these materials can be effectively tailored to meet the varying needs of students in a classroom (Sweeney & Roberts, 2022). This gap highlights the necessity of further investigation into how folktale-based materials can be designed to accommodate learners with different language proficiencies and learning styles.

The novelty of the current research lies in its focus on understanding the specific needs of junior high school teachers and students in Indonesia, an area that has not been extensively studied in relation to folktale-based English language teaching materials. By conducting a needs analysis, this study seeks to uncover the key preferences, challenges, and expectations of teachers and students, providing a deeper understanding of how folktales can be effectively integrated into English language curricula in the Indonesian context. This approach differs from previous research by emphasizing the practicalities of material design and implementation, rather than just theoretical frameworks (Kuswanto & Nugroho, 2022).

Furthermore, this study adapts the 3D model (Define, Design, Develop) for instructional material development, offering a structured approach to creating folktale-based materials that are both contextually relevant and pedagogically effective. By integrating local cultural elements into the design process, the research not only contributes to the field of language education but also provides a valuable framework for creating culturally responsive teaching materials that can be used in Indonesian schools. The development of such materials is expected to enhance both speaking proficiency and cultural awareness, thus addressing the gaps identified in previous research.

The primary objective of this research is to explore the specific needs of junior high school teachers and students in designing folktale-based English language learning materials that promote speaking proficiency, learner autonomy, and cultural awareness. The study aims to answer the following questions: (1) What are the key needs and preferences of teachers and students when using folktale-based materials in English language teaching?

This research makes a significant contribution to the field of English language education by demonstrating how needs analysis can inform the development of culturally responsive teaching materials. By focusing on the specific context of Indonesian junior high schools, the study provides empirical evidence that highlights the importance of cultural relevance in material design. The study also contributes to the broader field of language education by offering a practical model for integrating local cultural elements into English language instruction, thus supporting the development of oral communication skills, learner autonomy, and intercultural competence.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design with a case study approach to explore the needs of teachers and learners in designing folktale-integrated English materials. A case study design was deemed appropriate as it allows for an in-depth understanding of the contextual, cultural, and pedagogical factors shaping the integration of local folktales into English language teaching. The research followed a Research and Development (R&D) orientation, specifically adapting the 3D model (Define, Design, Develop) from Thiagarajan, Semmel, and Semmel's (1974) Four-D Model. In this stage, the focus was on the Define phase, which emphasizes systematic needs analysis through multiple data sources to inform material development.

This study adopted a qualitative case study within a Research and Development (R&D) framework, focusing on the Define phase of the 3D model (Define–Design–Develop). The Define phase was selected to conduct a systematic needs analysis as the foundation for subsequent material design and development. Although the broader R&D cycle includes Design and Develop phases, this study concentrated on identifying pedagogical, cultural, and contextual needs prior to prototype development.

2.2 Participants

A total of 61 junior high school English teachers from western, central, and eastern regions of Indonesia participated in the questionnaire stage. From this group, nine teachers ($N = 9$) as coded as P1-P9 were purposively selected for in-depth interviews to represent diverse geographical, institutional, and teaching contexts. The following inclusion criteria were applied in the selection process: 1) School Type: Teachers employed in public junior high schools under the national curriculum; 2) Storytelling Integration Experience: Prior teaching experience using folktales, fairy tales, or other culturally based narratives in English instruction, either through conventional or digital methods; 3) Teaching Experience: A minimum of three years teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL); 4) Digital Literacy: Basic proficiency and confidence in applying digital tools for teaching purposes; 5)

Willingness: Agreement to participate in interviews and share detailed experiences.; 6) Geographic Representation: Teachers drawn from urban, semi-urban, and rural contexts to capture diverse teaching environments.

2.3 Participants

This study employed purposive sampling to select participants who were most relevant to the research objectives. Teachers were chosen based on predefined criteria, including teaching experience, prior exposure to storytelling or culturally based materials, and willingness to participate in reflective discussions. This sampling technique was considered appropriate to obtain rich, information-dense data rather than statistical generalization.

2.4 Instruments

This study employed three instruments: document analysis, questionnaire, and semi-structured interviews. These instruments were triangulated to capture both broad trends and in-depth perspectives.

a. Document Analysis

Document analysis was conducted on curriculum documents, syllabi, lesson plans, and existing English learning materials at the junior high school level. The purpose was to:

- 1) Examine how folktales and other culturally relevant narratives are currently integrated into classroom practice.
- 2) Identify gaps in supporting oral proficiency, learner autonomy, and cultural understanding.
- 3) Align perceived needs with official curriculum requirements.

b. Questionnaire

An online questionnaire was distributed to 61 junior high school English teachers across Indonesia. The questionnaire contained both closed- and open-ended items and was divided into four sections:

Table 1

Questionnaire Sections and Items

No	Section	Item Description
1	Demographic Information	Teaching experience, school location, digital literacy
2	Current Practices	Frequency and modes of integrating folktales into lessons
3	Challenges and Needs	Perceived difficulties in promoting speaking skills, independent learning, and cultural awareness
4	Expectations and Preferences	Desired types of folktale-based tasks, formats (e.g., modules, flashcards, digital platforms), and accessibility features

c. Semi-Structured Interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted with nine purposively selected teachers (P1-P9) to enrich and contextualize the survey findings. The interview protocol included questions such as:

- 1) How do you currently integrate folktales into English teaching?
- 2) What challenges do you face when using folktales for speaking activities?
- 3) What kinds of materials would best support learner independence?
- 4) How can folktale-based materials foster cultural identity while connecting to global perspectives?

2.5 Data Collection Procedure

The procedure followed three sequential steps:

- a) Stage 1: Document Analysis
collection and review of curriculum, syllabi, and teaching materials to identify baseline practices and curricular requirements.
- b) Stage 2: Questionnaire Administration
distribution of the online questionnaire to 61 teachers; responses were analyzed to generate descriptive statistics and initial thematic patterns.
- c) Stage 3: Semi-Structured Interviews

purposive selection of nine teachers for in-depth interviews to validate and expand upon questionnaire findings.

Data collection was conducted over a four-month period, including document analysis (Month 1), questionnaire administration (Month 2), and semi-structured interviews (Months 3-4).

2.6 Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to standard ethical research protocols. Participants were provided with informed consent forms, ensuring their voluntary participation and the right to withdraw at any stage. To safeguard confidentiality, participants' identities and school affiliations were anonymized and represented by pseudonyms (P1-P9). All data were used exclusively for academic purposes. Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the Universitas Terbuka Research Ethics Committee prior to data collection.

2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis combined descriptive statistics and content analysis to provide both breadth and depth of findings. The integration of these analytical techniques allowed the study to capture both general patterns and context-specific insights that can guide the development of folktale-based English learning materials.

a) Descriptive Statistics:

Questionnaire data (frequencies, percentages, and distributions) were analyzed to identify trends in teachers' preferences, challenges, and expectations.

b) Content Analysis:

Qualitative data from document analysis and interviews were systematically coded to identify recurring themes related to oral proficiency, learner independence, and cultural understanding. The coding process followed Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2019) framework of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification.

The content analysis followed a systematic coding procedure involving open coding, category development, and theme identification. To enhance analytical rigor, emerging themes were cross-checked across data sources, and coding consistency was discussed among the research team to ensure interpretive reliability.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

Analysis of data from document analysis, questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews revealed three key themes that represent the major needs for folktale-based English learning materials: (1) interactive and accessible materials to strengthen speaking practice, (2) tasks that foster autonomy through reflective and collaborative learning, and (3) integration of cultural elements that connect local identity with global perspectives. To avoid a linear presentation, each theme is described through a different sequence of evidence to capture a more dynamic triangulation.

Interactive and Accessible Materials for Speaking Practice

The voices of teachers strongly foregrounded this theme. Many highlighted that folktales were naturally engaging, yet without scaffolding, the activities often lost focus.

P4 noted: *"Students are more confident when they retell folktales, but without structured guidance, the activity lacks focus."*

P7 emphasized: *"Flashcards and visual prompts really help students recall vocabulary and tell the story more smoothly."*

P1 added: *"Our students want to speak, but they need step-by-step support, like story maps or sentence starters."*

These insights were mirrored in the questionnaire responses: 72% of teachers believed current materials were insufficient to promote oral proficiency, while 68% stressed the importance of interactive tools like flashcards, role-play cards, and storytelling modules. In terms of frequency, only 28% of respondents regularly used folktales, 47% used them occasionally, and 25% never incorporated them due to lack of structured resources.

From the perspective of document analysis, the gap is evident: although the curriculum emphasizes communicative competence, folktales are rarely embedded in speaking-focused tasks. Instead, texts are dominated by generic dialogues and imported stories. This disconnect highlights the need for practical, low-cost, and accessible folktale-based resources that are aligned with national goals yet feasible across diverse school contexts.

Tasks that Foster Autonomy through Reflective and Collaborative Learning

Unlike the first theme, the questionnaire results serve as the starting point here. About 65% of teachers reported challenges in designing autonomy-supportive activities. Many noted that students depended too heavily on teacher instructions and struggled with tasks that required self-direction. Teachers indicated strong preferences for activities like peer discussions, group dramatizations, and reflective learning journals.

Interviews elaborated these concerns.

P2 observed: *“Students rely too much on us; we need materials that create space for them to reflect and collaborate.”*

P5 emphasized group projects: *“When students act out folktales in groups, they take ownership and help each other, not just wait for teacher directions.”*

P8 stressed peer feedback: *“Peer feedback after storytelling makes students more aware of their progress and motivates them to improve.”*

P9 proposed reflection tools: *“It would be good if students had a simple logbook to write what they learned after telling a story.”*

In contrast, document analysis revealed that reflective or collaborative learning was rarely prioritized. Lesson plans tended to use folktales mainly for comprehension questions, leaving little room for learner autonomy. Together, these findings suggest that folktale-based resources should intentionally embed reflective and collaborative activities to support learner independence.

Integration of Cultural Elements Connecting Local and Global Perspectives

This theme is best understood by first examining policy-level insights. Curriculum documents clearly emphasize cultural awareness, but the materials reviewed often leaned on Western narratives or culturally neutral content, creating a gap between policy and classroom practice.

Teachers, however, consistently articulated the cultural and motivational value of folktales. In interviews, they explained how using local stories in English not only motivated students but also instilled pride:

P6 stated: *“When students use their own stories in English, they feel proud and realize that local culture can be shared globally.”*

P8 added: *“By telling Indonesian folktales in English, students see themselves as part of the global community without losing their identity.”*

P2 reflected: *“They feel ownership when the stories come from their culture—it’s not just about learning English, it’s about telling who they are.”*

P9 noted: *“Our students dream of joining international competitions; folktales in English can prepare them to present Indonesian culture to the world.”*

The questionnaire confirmed this cultural gap, with 78% of teachers agreeing that current resources fail to connect local culture with global perspectives. Respondents expressed a strong preference for integrating folktales as a bridge between identity formation and intercultural competence.

These findings underscore the importance of culturally integrated content that simultaneously builds language proficiency and positions learners as cultural ambassadors.

3.2 Discussion

The findings of this study highlight three interconnected needs in developing folktale-based English learning materials: interactive and accessible resources for speaking practice, autonomy-supportive tasks through reflection and collaboration, and integration of cultural elements that connect local identity to global perspectives. These results align with and extend prior research in the last five years on material development, learner autonomy, and culturally responsive pedagogy.

First, the importance of interactive and accessible speaking materials resonates with studies emphasizing that storytelling and task-based activities enhance communicative competence in EFL contexts (Widodo, 2019; Fitriani & Yusuf, 2020). Recent scholarship confirms that structured scaffolding, such as story maps, visual prompts, and guided retelling, significantly boosts learners' oral fluency and confidence (Alsubaie & Ashuraidah, 2021; Yusof & Saad, 2021). Similar to this study's findings, teachers in rural or semi-urban schools elsewhere have reported challenges in adopting digital platforms, underscoring the need for low-cost, print-based resources (Sari & Wahyuni, 2022; Chen & Tseng, 2023). These findings reinforce the argument that folktale-based flashcards and step-by-step modules are both pedagogically sound and contextually feasible.

Second, the need for tasks that foster autonomy through reflection and collaboration is consistent with the growing emphasis on self-regulated learning in language education. Prior research shows that reflective journals, peer assessment, and collaborative projects help students internalize responsibility for learning and build critical thinking (Benson, 2020; Lengkanawati, 2021). Studies in Indonesia and other Asian contexts indicate that students often remain teacher-dependent, but autonomy can be cultivated through structured peer interaction and reflective practices (Damayanti, 2021; Nguyen, 2022). The insights from this study, that logbooks, group dramatizations, and peer feedback on storytelling foster ownership, mirror earlier evidence that culturally embedded, collaborative tasks not only increase engagement but also sustain motivation (Rahman & Anwar, 2022; Huang, 2023).

Third, the emphasis on cultural integration aligns with the concept of culturally responsive pedagogy and intercultural competence. Scholars have argued that embedding local narratives into English language materials promotes identity affirmation and intercultural awareness simultaneously (Kramsch, 2020; Setyowati & Sukmawan, 2021). Recent empirical studies confirm that folktales provide a powerful medium for learners to express local values in English and to envision themselves as part of global discourse (Marini & Sari, 2021; Chang, 2022). This study supports and extends these insights: by showing that teachers perceive Indonesian folktales as both motivating and globally relevant, it demonstrates how culturally integrated content can position learners as cultural ambassadors (Widodo & Perfecto, 2022; Akbari, 2023).

Taken together, these findings affirm that folktale-based learning resources, when designed to be interactive, autonomy-supportive, and culturally integrated, hold strong potential for improving speaking proficiency, fostering learner independence, and bridging local-global cultural contexts. The triangulated evidence from this study not only corroborates previous research but also provides context-specific contributions to material development for Indonesian EFL classrooms.

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that folktale-based English learning materials are most effective when they are interactive, autonomy-supportive, and culturally integrated. Triangulated findings from questionnaires, document analysis, and teachers' voices confirm that existing materials often fall short in supporting speaking proficiency, learner independence, and meaningful cultural engagement. The findings demonstrate that folktales, when scaffolded through tools such as flashcards, role-play activities, reflection logs, and collaborative dramatizations, can bridge curriculum objectives with learners' lived cultural experiences. Beyond linguistic development, folktale-based materials offer a pathway for learners to develop intercultural awareness and to position themselves as active participants in global communication while maintaining local identity.

5. Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the sample size, particularly for in-depth interviews, was relatively small and may not fully represent all Indonesian EFL contexts. Second, the geographical scope, although diverse, did not include all provinces. Third, this study focused on the needs analysis (Define phase) and did not include pilot testing or classroom implementation of developed materials. These limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings

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