



Integrating Blora Local Wisdom into Culturally Responsive EFL: Communicative Engagement of Islamic Early Childhood Education Students

¹Mahi Sultan Salama*, ¹Achmad Irchamni, ¹Kristiyuana, ²Esty Setyo Utaminingsih, ¹Siti Nur'aini

Corresponding Author: *mahi.sultan.s@gmail.com

¹ Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Muhammadiyah Blora, Blora, Indonesia

² Universitas Negeri Semarang, Semarang, Indonesia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received 6 June 2026

Revised 31 July 2026

Accepted 22 August 2026

ABSTRACT

This study examined how Blora local wisdom was integrated into culturally responsive EFL, how it shaped communicative engagement, and which factors supported or constrained implementation among third-semester Islamic Early Childhood Education students. Methods: Guided by Yin's qualitative single-case study methodology, the study involved one English lecturer and ten students. Evidence came from classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and analysis of teaching materials and student artifacts. Data were organized in a case database, coded thematically, compared across sources, and interpreted through pattern matching. Results: Blora traditions, culinary heritage, Barongan art, Samin culture, and related values were embedded in discussions, presentations, group work, media creation, and teaching practice. Familiar cultural content helped students generate ideas and participate in questioning, responding, presenting, and using English. Engagement nevertheless remained uneven because of limited vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties, nervousness, fear of mistakes, and dominant peers. Research Implications: Local wisdom can provide a culturally meaningful entry point for communication when tasks are supported by language scaffolding, peer collaboration, feedback, equitable participation structures, and a psychologically safe classroom climate.

Keywords

Communicative
Culturally Responsive EFL
Islamic Early Childhood
Education
Local Wisdom
Teacher Education

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Introduction

Contemporary English language education now stands at a difficult intersection between global communicative mobility and the protection of learners' cultural rootedness [1]–[2]. Empirical research in an online EFL classroom in Thailand demonstrated that interculturally embedded instruction improved learners' intercultural communicative competence, L2 motivation, and English-learning outcomes [3]. A tertiary EFL study in China further showed that cultural metacognition-oriented instruction enhanced learners' affective, metacognitive, and behavioral dimensions of intercultural competence [4].

Culturally responsive language pedagogy is therefore central to EFL because it allows instruction to maintain learners' cultural and linguistic identities while supporting language development [5]. Research on EFL teachers' engagement with culturally responsive teaching found that teachers needed to draw on students' cultural resources cognitively, emotionally, and socially in order to make English learning more meaningful [6]. In Indonesia, a culturally responsive English teaching model for primary EFL classrooms also positioned students' life experiences, learning styles, and expectations as essential components of English instruction [7].

The integration of local culture into English language teaching has become a significant trend in Southeast Asian EFL scholarship because it offers learners familiar contexts for communication [8]. A quasi-experimental study in Thailand showed that intercultural curriculum design could support English proficiency and intercultural development when cultural content was intentionally embedded in EFL instruction [3]. A university-based EFL study also indicated that culture-oriented instruction could transform classroom learning from the memorization of cultural facts into reflective intercultural action [4], [9].

In Indonesia, the need for communicative EFL improvement remains visible because the EF English Proficiency Index 2025 ranks Indonesia 80th out of 123 countries and territories [10]. The same national context is pedagogically significant because Indonesia was the most frequently represented country in a Southeast Asian review of the integration of local culture in English language teaching [11]. Indonesian EFL practice, therefore, requires models that connect English learning with students' cultural experiences rather than relying only on decontextualized language drills [7]. This need is particularly relevant for teacher education

because culturally responsive English teaching requires future teachers to understand learners' experiences, identities, and classroom realities before transforming them into pedagogical practice [12]. For undergraduate students in Islamic Early Childhood Education, the present study addresses a professional context in which English learning should be connected to child-centered pedagogy, Islamic educational values, and local community life [13].

Based on an interview with the lecturer, the third-semester Islamic Early Childhood Education undergraduate students at Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Muhammadiyah (STAIM) Blora were positioned not only as English learners but also as prospective teachers who would later adapt local cultural resources into learning activities for young children. Blora provides a rich pedagogical basis for culturally responsive EFL through Samin culture, Barongan art, Gas Deso Blora, Tayub Blora, and local culinary heritage. The author's abstract explains that Blora traditions, culinary heritage, cultural values, Barongan art, and Samin culture were used to make EFL learning more meaningful, accessible, and contextually relevant for third-semester Islamic Early Childhood Education undergraduate students. This local design aligns with Southeast Asian EFL research, which shows that local culture can foster familiarity, contextual meaning, and engagement in English learning [14]. The central problem this study addresses is that EFL learning is often detached from students' real lives, whereas pre-service teachers need contextual, meaningful English instruction [15]. A recent review of the classroom environment in EFL learning argues that engagement is shaped by what happens within and between people in the classroom, not merely by the presence of materials or techniques [16]. Research on perceived teacher support also showed that supportive interaction could influence students' academic engagement in foreign language learning through enjoyment and boredom [17].

Communicative engagement in this study is understood as students' active use of English in asking questions, answering, discussing, responding to peers, presenting, and attempting to express meaning in classroom interaction [18]. Recent research on EFL engagement found that classroom climate, growth mindset, and achievement goals were interconnected factors shaping students' engagement in learning English [19]. Teacher-support research also indicated that learners' emotions could mediate the relationship between classroom support and academic engagement in foreign language learning [12].

Although previous studies reviewed local culture integration in Southeast Asian ELT [8], they did not specifically examine Blora local wisdom as EFL content for Islamic early childhood teacher education. On the other hand, earlier research explored EFL teachers' engagement with culturally responsive teaching, focusing on teachers in rural Chinese schools rather than students' communicative engagement in an Indonesian higher education

classroom [6]. Furthermore, a recent EFL review discussed classroom environment and engagement; it did not explain how highly localized cultural content could be transformed into communicative classroom practices [16]. Although an Indonesian culturally responsive English-teaching model was developed for primary school EFL teachers [7], it did not address Islamic Early Childhood Education undergraduate students at a local Islamic higher education institution in Blora.

The urgency of this study lies in designing EFL learning that supports global communication while protecting students' linguistic and cultural resources, consistent with UNESCO's guidance on multilingual and culturally grounded education [1]–[2]. Indonesia's placement in the low English-proficiency category further underscores the need to strengthen learners' speaking competence [10]. Accordingly, this study aimed to examine how Blora local wisdom was integrated into culturally responsive EFL, how the integration shaped PIAUD students' communicative engagement, and which factors supported or inhibited its implementation.

The study addressed three research questions: (RQ1) How was Blora's local wisdom integrated into culturally responsive EFL instruction? (RQ2) How did this integration shape students' communicative engagement? (RQ3) What factors supported or inhibited its implementation?

The novelty of this study lies in its specific focus on Blora local wisdom as a culturally responsive EFL resource for Islamic Early Childhood Education students at STAI Muhammadiyah Blora. The study contributes a concrete account of how Samin culture, Barongan art, Gas Deso Blora, Tayub Blora, and local culinary heritage can be transformed into discussion, presentation, group work, teaching practice, and media creation. By foregrounding communicative engagement rather than merely cultural awareness or material development, this study offers a localized contribution to EFL pedagogy, teacher education, and curriculum design grounded in local wisdom in Indonesian higher education.

Material and Methods

A. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative single-case study guided by Yin's methodological approach. The case was defined as a contemporary, bounded educational phenomenon examined in its real-life setting through convergent evidence from observation, interviews, and documents [20]. The unit of analysis was the culturally responsive EFL learning process involving one English lecturer and ten third-semester students in the Islamic Early Childhood Education program at STAI Muhammadiyah Blora. Qualitative data analysis principles were used to systematically organize and interpret the case evidence [21].

The study focused on the forms of Blora local wisdom integration, students' communicative engagement, and the conditions that supported or constrained the learning process. The case was descriptive and explanatory: it documented what occurred in the bounded classroom and examined how cultural familiarity, instructional scaffolding, and classroom interaction were connected. A qualitative orientation was appropriate because the study prioritized participants' experiences, classroom practices, and contextual meanings rather than statistical measurement [22]. The case boundaries, research questions, and sources of evidence were specified before analysis to maintain methodological coherence.

B. Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in the Islamic Early Childhood Education program at STAI Muhammadiyah Blora. The setting was selected because the program prepares prospective early childhood teachers and because the surrounding community provides cultural resources that can be transformed into EFL content, including Samin culture, Barongan art, Gas Deso Blora, Tayub Blora, village traditions, and local culinary heritage. Participants comprised one English lecturer and the entire third-semester cohort of ten students ($n = 10$). Total-population participation was used because all members of the bounded class were directly involved in the instructional process. The lecturer was coded L1, and students were coded S1-S10 to protect identity while retaining the connection between evidence and interpretation.

C. Data Collection

Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Observations captured how local wisdom was introduced, how tasks were organized, and how students participated in questioning, answering, discussion, presentation, peer response, and teaching practice. Interviews with L1 and S1-S10 explored the rationale for integration, experiences of communicative engagement, and the conditions that support or inhibit it. Document analysis examined teaching materials, assignment instructions, presentation slides, student-created media, teaching-practice products, and reflection notes. Using three evidence sources enabled each research question to be examined through behavioral, experiential, and documentary data.

Observation records were written as structured field notes; interviews were guided by open-ended questions and transcribed for analysis; and documents were logged in an artifact inventory. All sources were labeled by date, participant code, activity, and research-question relevance before being entered into the case database. Table 1 summarizes the alignment between the data-collection techniques, research questions, and expected evidence.

Table 1. Data Collection Technique

Technique	RQ and analytical focus	Evidence retained in the case database
Classroom observation	RQ1-RQ3: integration practices, communicative behavior, and classroom conditions	Field notes on discussion, presentations, group work, teaching practice, feedback, participation, and interactional constraints
Semi-structured interviews	RQ1-RQ3: lecturer rationale, student experiences, engagement, support, and barriers	Anonymized lecturer and student transcripts coded L1 and S1-S10
Document analysis	RQ1 and RQ2: cultural content, task transformation, and evidence of communicative production	Teaching materials, assignment sheets, presentation files, student media, teaching-practice products, and reflection notes

D. Research Instruments

The instruments consisted of an observation guide, a student interview guide, a lecturer interview guide, field-note sheets, and a documentation checklist. The semi-structured interview guides-maintained alignment with the research questions while allowing participants to elaborate. The student guide addressed familiarity with Blora local wisdom, willingness to communicate, confidence, peer and lecturer support, language-related difficulties, relevance for teaching young learners, and suggestions for improvement. The lecturer guide addressed course context, pedagogical rationale, task design, indicators of engagement, scaffolding, challenges, observed changes, and documentary evidence.

Table 2 presents the instrument blueprint and demonstrates alignment among the research questions, constructs, indicators, and data sources. The observation and interview prompts were used consistently across the bounded case, while follow-up probes were used to clarify examples, contradictions, and negative cases.

Table 2. Instrument Design

Instrument	Construct/area covered	Key indicators	Data source
Observation guide	Classroom implementation and communicative engagement	Use of local topics; discussions; presentations; group work; teaching practice; student responses	Classroom observation and field notes
Student interview guide	Student experience and communicative engagement	Confidence, participation, familiar topics, vocabulary difficulty, pronunciation, peer support, lecturer support	Undergraduate students
Lecturer interview guide	Instructional rationale and pedagogical implementation	Reasons for integration, strategies, engagement indicators, challenges, feedback, documentation	English lecturer
Documentation checklist	Evidence of local-wisdom-based EFL products	Teaching materials, student tasks, slides, media, teaching-practice artefacts, reflection notes	Classroom documents and learning products

E. Data Analysis

The analysis combined Yin-guided case study logic with thematic analysis. First, observation notes, interview transcripts, and documents were compiled into a case database. Second, the data were read repeatedly and reduced into units relevant to RQ1-RQ3. Third, first-cycle codes were assigned and grouped into categories. Fourth, categories were reassembled into within-case themes through data displays and iterative comparison [23]. Fifth, thematic patterns were reviewed across sources and refined for coherence and evidentiary support [24]. Finally, pattern matching and explanation building were used to compare the observed evidence with the study's propositions concerning cultural familiarity, communicative engagement, and classroom support [20]. Divergent evidence was retained as a negative case rather than being removed.

The resulting analytic matrix linked each theme to its supporting observation record, participant code, and document or learning artifact. A claim was treated as strongly supported when evidence converged across at least two source types; claims supported by one source were reported more cautiously. The final stage produced an integrated case explanation for each research question and a cross-question synthesis of how local wisdom became communicative content, how engagement was expressed, and why participation remained uneven.

Table 3. Yin-Guided Case Study Analysis Procedure

No.	Stage	Analytical procedure	Output
1.	Compile	Organize field notes, transcripts, and artifacts in a labeled case database	Traceable evidence set
2.	Disassemble	Segment data and apply first-cycle codes aligned with RQ1-RQ3	Initial code list
3.	Reassemble	Group codes into categories and within-case themes	Thematic displays
4.	Pattern match	Compare themes across observation, interview, and document sources	Convergent and divergent patterns
5.	Explain	Develop explanations linking familiarity, scaffolding, climate, and engagement	Case-level explanatory account
6.	Conclude	Review negative cases, verify the chain of evidence, and answer each RQ	Final findings and implications

F. Trustworthiness

Credibility was strengthened through source triangulation, pattern matching, and examination of negative cases; transferability through thick description; dependability through a documented case protocol and audit trail; and confirmability through reflexive analytic memos [25]. Observation data, lecturer and student interviews, and learning artifacts were compared within an RQ-by-source matrix. The audit trail included field notes, transcripts, coding records, analytic memos, thematic matrices, and document inventories [24].

Interpretive claims were retained only when supported by convergent evidence or explicitly reported as divergent cases [25].

Table 4. Trustworthiness Strategies

Strategy	Application in this study	Quality Criterion
Source triangulation	Compared observations, L1 and S1-S10 interviews, and learning artifacts by RQ	Credibility
Pattern matching and negative cases	Tested whether evidence supported the proposed relationship between familiarity, scaffolding, and engagement; retained contradictory evidence	Credibility and confirmability
Thick description	Described the institution, participants, local cultural content, tasks, and interactional conditions	Transferability
Audit trail and reflexivity	Maintained case protocol, field notes, transcripts, coding records, matrices, document inventory, and analytic memos	Dependability and confirmability

G. Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to the principles of informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, privacy, and responsible data management, consistent with the BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research [26]. Before data collection, participants were informed about the study's purpose, data sources, intended use, confidentiality procedures, and right to withdraw. Participant identities were anonymized using L1 for the lecturer and S1-S10 for the students.

The research protocol required prior permission for audio recording and the use of learning artifacts; only evidence for which permission was documented was included in the case database. Digital files, transcripts, field notes, and classroom documents were stored in password-protected folders and were used solely for academic research. Identifiable information was excluded from the manuscript and from the evidence summaries.

Results and Discussions

A. Results

1. RQ1: Forms of Blora Local Wisdom Integration

Blora's local wisdom was not treated as an additional cultural topic but as the substantive content of communication. Observation notes were recorded for use in discussions, assignments, presentations, media projects, peer feedback, and teaching practice. In the lecturer interview, L1 explained that English I, English II, and English for Early Childhood were intended to strengthen basic English competence while preparing students to teach young learners creatively. The document inventory confirmed the inclusion of Samin culture, Barongan art, sedekah bumi, culinary heritage, folklore, village traditions, traditional games, local places, traditional clothing, politeness values, and locally grounded ways of thinking and interacting.

Student interviews showed that topic selection was guided by familiarity, simplicity, attractiveness, and suitability for young children. S3, S6, and S10 described traditional games, local food, Barongan, sedekah bumi, village traditions, and folklore as easier to explain because examples were available in their own communities. Presentation slides and teaching-practice products showed that the cultural topics were converted into speaking prompts, vocabulary activities, demonstrations, stories, games, and visual media. The convergence of observation, interview, and documentary evidence indicated that English functioned as a medium for expressing local knowledge rather than replacing it.

2. Pedagogical Transformation for Early Childhood English Teaching

The integration of Blora local wisdom was closely connected to students' professional preparation as prospective early childhood educators. Students not only discussed local culture but also transformed it into child-friendly English-learning activities. Their proposed practices included storytelling, games, media creation, simple vocabulary activities, teaching simulations, local-food demonstrations, Barongan-based performance, ecoprint activities using teak leaves, and direct practice with objects or visual materials. These activities reflected the need to make English learning concrete, playful, and developmentally appropriate for young learners.

Students repeatedly described local wisdom as well-suited to early childhood English because it is grounded in children's daily experiences and can be presented visually, physically, and playfully. Local stories, food, games, and art helped children connect new English words to familiar cultural objects and practices. At the same time, students linked the use of local wisdom with cultural preservation and character education. They believed that introducing Blora culture to children could maintain local identity and transmit values such as honesty, harmony with nature, morality, independence, politeness, and care for community traditions. Thus, the novelty of the findings lies in the highly localized adaptation of Blora cultural resources into early-childhood-oriented EFL practice, not merely in the inclusion of culture as classroom material.

3. RQ2: From Cultural Familiarity to Communicative Engagement

Cultural familiarity encouraged more active EFL communication. Observation records documented more frequent questioning, answering, peer response, and idea exchange when tasks used Blora-based topics. In interviews, several students explained that they could prepare ideas more quickly because they already understood the cultural content. This reduced the conceptual distance between their lived experience and the English language, making it easier to discuss local food, Barongan, sedekah bumi, village traditions, local stories, and familiar places than abstract or unfamiliar topics.

Discussion was the most frequent and preferred form of engagement. Students used it to ask about meaning, compare village traditions, clarify vocabulary, and negotiate how to express local concepts in English. Presentations and teaching practice produced more demanding forms of engagement because students had to speak before others and simulate instruction. The lecturer identified engagement through observable behaviors: initiating or answering questions, responding to peers, sharing ideas, collaborating, presenting, and persisting in English use. A negative pattern was also evident: some students remained quiet or relied on more confident peers, even though they were familiar with the topic.

4. RQ3: Supporting and Inhibiting Factors

Four conditions supported engagement: familiar cultural topics, peer collaboration, lecturer scaffolding, and a safe classroom climate. In contrast, limited vocabulary, pronunciation difficulty, fear of mistakes, uneven peer participation, restricted thinking time, and limited exposure to English outside class constrained participation. The case therefore showed that familiarity created an accessible entry point but did not automatically remove linguistic or affective barriers. Table 5 presents the RQ-aligned triangulation matrix, and Table 6 summarizes the supporting and inhibiting factors.

Table 5. RQ-Aligned Triangulation of Findings

Research question	Theme	Representative Evidence Across Sources	Case Interpretation
RQ1	Contextual EFL content	Observation: local topics structured discussions, presentations, and tasks. Interviews: L1 and S1/S3/S9 described Samin, Barongan, sedekah bumi, local food, folklore, games, and village traditions. Documents: slides, task sheets, and media products contained these topics.	Local wisdom functioned as communicative content rather than decorative cultural information.
RQ1	Pedagogical transformation	Observation: students simulated child-friendly English activities. Interviews: S3/S6/S10 emphasized games, storytelling, local-food demonstrations, and visual media. Documents: teaching-practice plans, ecoprint products, vocabulary activities, and media drafts.	Students transformed local culture into developmentally appropriate pedagogical resources.
RQ2	Increased communicative participation	Observation: more questions, responses, discussion turns, peer exchanges, and presentations occurred during familiar topics. Interviews: students reported faster idea generation and greater willingness to speak.	Cultural familiarity lowered conceptual demands and made English interaction more accessible.
RQ2	Uneven engagement/ negative cases	Observation: some students remained quiet or depended on dominant peers. Interviews: S participants reported vocabulary gaps, pronunciation concerns, nervousness, and fear of error.	Familiar content supported engagement but did not eliminate linguistic insecurity.
RQ3	Supports and constraints	Across sources, familiar topics, group work, lecturer examples, feedback, thinking time, and	Local-wisdom-based EFL requires

Research question	Theme	Representative Evidence Across Sources	Case Interpretation
		tolerance of mistakes supported engagement; vocabulary limitations, pronunciation difficulty, dominant peers, and restricted time constrained it.	structured language scaffolding and participation management.

Table 6. Supporting and Inhibiting Factors in Local-Wisdom-Based EFL

Category	Factor	Empirical indication	Pedagogical implication
Supporting	Familiar local topics	Students generated ideas more readily when topics were connected to Blora culture and daily life.	Use local culture as an entry point for structured speaking tasks.
Supporting	Peer collaboration	Peers helped one another generate ideas, clarify meanings, and rehearse responses.	Use defined group roles and collaborative rehearsal to reduce anxiety.
Supporting	Lecturer scaffolding	Examples, prompts, templates, feedback, vocabulary support, and staged practice sustained participation.	Sequence support from modeling to guided and independent communication.
Supporting	Safe classroom climate	Students were more willing to speak when mistakes were treated as part of learning.	Use non-judgmental correction and normalize approximation.
Inhibiting	Limited vocabulary	Students became silent, switched language, or depended on peers when they lacked needed words.	Pre-teach lexical sets and provide sentence frames.
Inhibiting	Pronunciation and fear of mistakes	Students reported nervousness and embarrassment about incorrect pronunciation.	Embed low-stakes pronunciation rehearsal and confidence-building practice.
Inhibiting	Uneven participation and limited time	Dominant peers, insufficient thinking time, and unfocused discussion reduced individual turns.	Use assigned speaking turns, wait time, and clearer task structure.

B. Discussion

1. Blora Local Wisdom as Culturally Responsive Communicative Content

The findings suggested that Blora's local wisdom was not used as decorative cultural information, but as communicative content that shaped how students discussed, presented, designed media, and practiced English teaching for young learners (L1). The integration appeared in students' use of Samin values, Barongan art, sedekah bumi, local culinary heritage, local stories, village traditions, and traditional games as materials for discussion, presentation, media creation, and teaching practice (S1; S3; S9). Such a pattern showed that local culture was embedded in task design and classroom interaction, rather than merely mentioned as background knowledge (L1).

Kong et al. showed that EFL teachers' engagement with culturally responsive teaching involved both cultural knowledge and classroom practice, especially when teachers drew on learners' cultural resources to support learning. The present study extended this finding by demonstrating that cultural resources could be operationalized at a micro-local level

through Blora-specific materials and activities (L1; S6). Unlike broader discussions of culturally responsive teaching, this study demonstrated how localized cultural knowledge served as communicative input for English-mediated classroom tasks [6]. Kristiawan et al. found that locally culture-based digital storytelling helped Indonesian EFL learners build vocabulary, express cultural identity, and make meaning in English [27]. The present study complemented their work by showing that local culture also supported non-digital classroom-based communicative practices, such as discussion, presentations, media creation, and teaching practices (S6; L1). The key implication was that local wisdom became valuable when it was designed as a communicative resource rather than treated as cultural decoration (L1).

2. Local Wisdom as a Pedagogical Bridge for Early Childhood English Teacher Preparation

A distinctive contribution of this study was that Blora's local wisdom supported students' preparation as prospective early childhood English teachers (L1). The students adapted local cultural resources into child-friendly English learning activities, such as storytelling, descriptions of local food, traditional games, Barongan-based activities, media creation, and teaching practice (S3; S6; S10). This finding positioned local wisdom as a pedagogical resource, not only as a topic for English-speaking practice (S10).

Kristiawan et al. showed that Indonesian learners could use local culture to expand their vocabulary and to represent cultural identity in English [27]. The present study moved beyond learner expression by demonstrating how local culture could be transformed into teaching materials for young children (S6; S10). The Cambridge English TKT: Young Learners handbook emphasized that teachers of young learners needed to understand young learners' development, classroom planning, teaching strategies, and assessment principles [28]. Students' use of games, stories, visual media, and concrete local objects, therefore, reflected an effort to make English learning developmentally appropriate for young children (S3; S6). This study, therefore, proposed that Blora local wisdom served as a pedagogical bridge between EFL learning, local identity, and early childhood teacher preparation (L1; S6). This bridge was evident as students transformed familiar cultural elements into communicative, child-oriented English-learning practices (S3; S10). The novelty of the study lay in this threefold role of local wisdom as cultural content, communicative stimulus, and pedagogical material (L1; S6).

3. Lecturer Support, Peer Collaboration, and Classroom Climate

The findings demonstrated that lecturer support and peer collaboration were decisive in sustaining students' willingness to communicate in English. Students described the lecturer's use of examples, feedback, motivating questions, tolerance for mistakes, and time to think, while the lecturer reported using scaffolding, templates, direct practice, and

staged language support. Liu et al. found that teacher support predicted EFL learning engagement through self-efficacy and achievement-goal orientation [29]. Zhao and Yang likewise reported that perceived teacher support was associated with academic engagement through enjoyment and boredom [17]. Wu and Cai further showed that caring teacher behavior supported engagement through self-efficacy and peer support [30]. The present case confirmed these patterns in a local-wisdom-based setting, where lecturer support and peer collaboration helped students transform familiar cultural knowledge into English communication.

Classroom climate also mattered because students were more willing to communicate when the atmosphere was safe and non-judgmental. Hosseini and Fathi found that classroom social climate predicted EFL engagement through academic buoyancy and emotions [31]. A recent review similarly emphasized that the classroom environment is central to learner engagement [16]. The present study extends this evidence by showing that a safe climate, feedback, and peer support remained important even when students' English proficiency was limited.

4. Case-Level Explanatory Synthesis

Pattern matching across RQ1-RQ3 indicated a sequential mechanism. Cultural familiarity reduced the effort required to generate ideas; lower conceptual distance increased willingness to enter interaction; scaffolded tasks converted willingness into observable participation; and a safe climate helped sustain participation despite linguistic insecurity. Negative cases showed that familiarity alone was insufficient when vocabulary, pronunciation, and speaking confidence remained weak. The case explanation is therefore not that local wisdom automatically improves engagement, but that it creates an accessible communicative starting point whose effect depends on structured language support, equitable participation, and supportive feedback.

5. Theoretical Contribution, Pedagogical Implications, and Future Research

Theoretically, this study contributes to culturally responsive EFL scholarship by demonstrating that local wisdom can serve as both cultural content and pedagogical material (L1; S6) and as a communicative stimulus. This contribution extends empirical work on locally culture-based EFL by moving from cultural representation to pedagogical transformation in early childhood teacher education [14], [32]. The study proposes a threefold interpretation of local wisdom in EFL teacher education: a cultural bridge, a cognitive bridge, and a pedagogical bridge (L1; S6). Local wisdom served as a cultural bridge, connecting English learning to students' local identity [33]. It served as a cognitive bridge, as familiar topics helped students generate ideas before speaking English, and as a pedagogical bridge, as students adapted local culture into child-friendly English activities

(S10). This threefold interpretation is the study's main novelty because it explains why Blora's local wisdom was pedagogically meaningful beyond its cultural value (L1; S6).

Pedagogically, local wisdom should be designed as a structured component of EFL task development rather than as an occasional cultural supplement (L1). Lecturers can develop speaking prompts based on local wisdom, vocabulary maps, pronunciation models, storytelling scripts, guided discussion questions, microteaching templates, local food descriptions, traditional game instructions, and media projects (S6; S10). Future research should develop and evaluate local-wisdom-based EFL modules to examine their effects on vocabulary development, speaking confidence, communicative performance, and pedagogical competence [27]. Further comparative studies across regions would also clarify whether the cultural, cognitive, and pedagogical bridge identified in this study is also evident in other local-wisdom-based EFL contexts (L1).

Conclusion

This study concluded that integrating Blora local wisdom into culturally responsive EFL instruction provided a meaningful pedagogical pathway for strengthening undergraduate students' communicative engagement in the Early Childhood Islamic Education Teacher Education program. Blora local wisdom, represented through Samin values, Barongan art, sedekah bumi, local culinary heritage, village traditions, local stories, and traditional games, was not merely used as supplementary cultural content but was transformed into communicative learning materials through discussions, presentations, group work, media creation, and English teaching practice for young learners. The findings showed that culturally familiar topics helped students generate ideas, participate more actively in classroom interaction, ask and answer questions, present local topics, and use English more meaningfully. However, students' engagement remained shaped by linguistic and affective challenges, particularly limited vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties, nervousness, fear of making mistakes, and unequal confidence among participants. The study also revealed that EFL instruction grounded in local wisdom became more effective when supported by lecturer scaffolding, peer collaboration, feedback, and a safe classroom climate. The main contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that Blora local wisdom served as a cultural, cognitive, and pedagogical bridge: it connected English learning to students' local identity, helped students develop ideas from familiar cultural experiences, and enabled them to adapt local cultural resources into child-friendly English learning activities. Therefore, this study suggests that EFL instruction in teacher education should incorporate local wisdom as a structured component of communicative task design, especially to prepare prospective early childhood teachers to teach English in ways that are contextually meaningful, culturally grounded, and pedagogically relevant.

Limitations and Suggestions

This study has several limitations. First, it was conducted in a single Islamic higher education institution in Blora and involved a limited group of third-semester Islamic Early Childhood Education students, so the findings cannot be generalized to all EFL teacher education contexts. Second, the qualitative case study design focused primarily on classroom observations and interviews, so students' communicative engagement was interpreted from observed participation and reported experiences rather than measured through standardized language proficiency assessments. Future studies are suggested to involve a broader range of participants from different teacher education institutions, use mixed-methods or longitudinal designs, and examine how locally grounded EFL instruction influences students' speaking development, intercultural awareness, and pedagogical readiness over time.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Authors



Mahi Sultan Salama   is a lecturer in Islamic Early Childhood Education at Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Muhammadiyah Blora, Indonesia. His academic interests focus on early childhood education, English language learning, culturally responsive pedagogy, and the integration of local wisdom into teacher education. He is currently pursuing doctoral studies in Education at Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang, where his academic work continues to explore innovative and contextual approaches to learning. (email: mahi.sultan.s@gmail.com)



Achmad Irchamni   is a lecturer in Islamic Early Childhood Education and currently serves as the Head of the Islamic Early Childhood Education Study Program at Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Muhammadiyah Blora, Indonesia. His academic interests include early childhood education, curriculum development, Islamic education, and teacher professional development. He is currently pursuing doctoral studies in Education at Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang. (email: airchamni@gmail.com)



Kristiyuana   is a lecturer in Islamic Early Childhood Education at Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Muhammadiyah Blora, Indonesia. Her academic interests include early childhood learning, educational leadership, classroom management, and teacher education. She is currently pursuing doctoral studies in Educational Management at Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia. (email: kristiyuana@staimublora.ac.id)



Esty Setyo Utaminingsih   served as a lecturer in the Teacher Education program at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah from 2023 to 2025 at Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Muhammadiyah Blora, Indonesia. She is currently pursuing doctoral studies in Primary Education at Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia. Her academic interests focus on elementary education, primary teacher education, culturally responsive pedagogy, local wisdom-based learning, and the development of science and social studies learning in elementary school contexts. In addition to her teaching and research activities, she is actively involved in writing books on basic education and in developing instructional media for elementary school learning. Her current research focuses on elementary education and the professional development of pre-service elementary education students. (email: estyutami@students.unnes.ac.id)



Siti Nur'aini   is a permanent lecturer in the Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Teacher Education Program at Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Muhammadiyah Blora, Indonesia. She serves as Chair of the Institute for Research and Community Service (LPPM) for the 2023–2027 period and is currently pursuing doctoral studies at Universitas Islam Negeri Walisongo Semarang. Her academic interests include Islamic and elementary education, curriculum and learning strategies, educational research, technology-supported instruction, and community empowerment. Through her leadership, she promotes collaborative research, academic publication, and community-service programs involving lecturers, students, schools, and local communities. She is also Editor-in-Chief of the Blora International Journal of Community Engagement. (email: nurainimuthia24@gmail.com)