



Recontextualizing EFL Reading Instruction through Local Wisdom: A Mixed-Methods Study of Problem-Based Learning

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ABSTRACT

Purpose - This study investigates how recontextualizing EFL reading instruction through local-wisdom-based Problem-Based Learning (PBL) supports students' reading comprehension and learning experiences.

Methodology - The study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to integrate students' perceptions with their classroom experiences. Quantitative data were collected through a closed-ended Likert-scale questionnaire administered to 27 third-semester English Language Teaching (ELT) students, examining perceived support for reading comprehension across text understanding, inferential reading, critical reading, cultural relevance, and engagement. Qualitative data were gathered through three classroom observations, reflective journals, and in-depth interviews with three purposively selected students.

Findings - Students perceived strong support for reading comprehension, particularly in cultural relevance, understanding main ideas, and engagement. Qualitative evidence indicates that familiarity with local narratives, traditions, and places reduced cognitive distance between texts and readers, enabling more focused meaning construction in English. Problem-based tasks further positioned reading as a purposeful, collaborative activity focused on solving contextualized problems rather than answering isolated comprehension questions. However, support for inferential and critical reading was perceived more unevenly, reflecting differences in linguistic readiness and analytical confidence. Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrates that positive perceptions of reading support were grounded in culturally familiar, problem-oriented, and socially mediated reading experiences.

Contribution - The study concludes that local-wisdom-based PBL fosters a coherent EFL reading environment that anchors comprehension and engagement while gradually supporting the development of higher-order reading processes.

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INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension constitutes a foundational component of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Learning, as it enables learners to access academic knowledge, construct meaning, and engage in higher-order thinking. In higher education contexts, particularly in EFL settings, students are expected not only to comprehend texts but also to interpret, evaluate, and critically engage with academic discourse. However, reading instruction in many EFL contexts continues to rely on generic, decontextualized materials that are only weakly connected to learners' sociocultural realities. In many EFL classrooms, including those at Indonesian universities, such instructional practices often limit students' engagement and result in surface-level comprehension, as learners struggle to relate the textual content to their own experiences. This condition is evident among EFL students at Universitas Sindang Kasih Majalengka, who often struggle to comprehend texts due to limited vocabulary, low motivation, and a lack of contextually relevant learning materials. Research on reading comprehension consistently indicates that understanding a text is not merely a linguistic process but an active cognitive activity shaped by readers' background knowledge and contextual familiarity (Reimer et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2021). Therefore, there is a pressing need to reconceptualize EFL reading instruction by integrating contextual relevance to support deeper and more meaningful comprehension.

One promising approach to addressing this issue is integrating local wisdom into reading materials. Integrating local wisdom into educational content has been shown to enhance comprehension by aligning learning materials with students' lived environments and cultural knowledge systems. Local wisdom functions not only as cultural heritage but also as a pedagogical resource that supports meaningful learning and bridges academic knowledge with social reality (Sibarani, 2018; Uge et al., 2019). Empirical studies further demonstrate that reading materials grounded in familiar cultural contexts significantly improve students' reading comprehension and motivation, as learners are better able to activate prior knowledge and interpret meaning coherently (Ulin Ni'mah & Mubarak, 2025; Uspayanti & Marnina, 2024). These findings suggest that local wisdom can function as a strategic bridge between textual content and learners' cognitive frameworks.

In addition to contextualized content, instructional approaches that actively engage learners in meaning-making processes have received increasing attention. Problem-Based Learning (PBL) represents one such approach, positioning authentic problems as the starting point for learning and encouraging students to construct knowledge through inquiry and collaboration. Research indicates that PBL supports deeper understanding and engagement by requiring learners to read purposefully to analyze information, justify interpretations, and solve contextualized problems (Barak & Yuan, 2021; Razak et al., 2022). By positioning reading as a goal-oriented process, PBL transforms comprehension into an active and meaningful activity rather than a passive decoding exercise.

Previous studies have shown that both culturally grounded materials and Problem-Based Learning independently contribute to improved learning outcomes in EFL contexts. However, a critical examination of the literature reveals several significant gaps. First, limited research has explicitly investigated the integration of local wisdom with Problem-Based Learning in the context of EFL reading comprehension, particularly as a coherent instructional design rather than as separate components. Second, existing studies have predominantly focused on school-level contexts, with relatively little attention given to higher education EFL settings where reading demands are more complex and require higher-order comprehension skills. Third, prior research has largely emphasized measurable learning outcomes, such as comprehension scores or motivation, while paying insufficient attention to how students perceive and experience culturally contextualized and problem-based reading instruction in classroom practice. These gaps indicate the need for a more comprehensive investigation that examines not only instructional effectiveness but also learners' perspectives and lived experiences.

To address these gaps, the present study investigates the implementation of local-wisdom-based Problem-Based Learning in an EFL reading classroom at Universitas Sindang Kasih Majalengka. This study employs an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to examine students' perceptions and learning experiences regarding reading comprehension. The study is guided by the following research questions: (1)

To what extent do EFL students perceive that local-wisdom-based Problem-Based Learning supports their reading comprehension processes? (2) How do EFL students describe their experiences of reading instruction recontextualized through Problem-Based Learning and local wisdom? (3) How do qualitative accounts of students' learning experiences help explain their questionnaire responses regarding the role of local-wisdom-based Problem-Based Learning in supporting reading comprehension?

By addressing these questions, this study contributes to the growing discourse on culturally grounded pedagogy and problem-based Learning in EFL reading instruction, offering empirical insights into how cultural relevance and problem orientation jointly shape students' comprehension, engagement, and meaning-making processes, particularly in higher education contexts.

METHODOLOGY

The research design employed in this study was systematically aligned with the study's purpose and research questions. The choice of design, research setting, participants, data collection instruments, and analytic procedures was guided by the need to capture both measurable trends in students' perceptions and nuanced accounts of their learning experiences within a recontextualized EFL reading environment.

Research Design

This study adopted an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to examine how local-wisdom-based Problem-Based Learning (PBL) supports EFL students' reading comprehension. The design involved two consecutive phases: quantitative data collection to identify overall patterns in students' perceptions, followed by qualitative inquiry to explain these patterns through students' classroom experiences (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023). Integration between quantitative and qualitative data was achieved through a connecting and explanatory strategy. Quantitative results were first analyzed to identify dominant trends and areas requiring further explanation. These results then informed the selection of interview participants and the development of qualitative inquiry, enabling in-depth exploration of students' responses. During the interpretation stage, qualitative findings were integrated with quantitative results using a narrative weaving approach, allowing students' lived experiences to explain and contextualize statistical patterns.

Two pedagogical lenses guided the study. Local wisdom was conceptualized as a culturally grounded resource that supports reading comprehension by connecting textual meaning with students' sociocultural experiences (Sibarani, 2018; Uge et al., 2019). Problem-Based Learning provided the instructional framework for organizing reading activities around authentic, contextually meaningful problems, encouraging inquiry and collaboration (Barak & Yuan, 2021; Razak et al., 2022). These lenses shaped both the design and interpretation of the study, allowing perceptual trends to be linked with culturally contextualized, problem-oriented reading practices.

Research Site and Participants

The study was conducted in the English Language Teaching (ELT) program at Universitas Sindang Kasih Majalengka. The participants were third-semester undergraduate students enrolled in a reading-related course that integrated Problem-Based Learning with local wisdom content. The participants were 27 students aged 18-21, with a relatively balanced gender distribution. According to institutional placement records, students' English proficiency ranged from lower-intermediate to intermediate. These characteristics are representative of typical EFL learners in Indonesian higher education contexts. A total of 27 students participated in the quantitative phase by completing a closed-ended questionnaire. The sample size reflects a total population sampling approach, as all students enrolled in the course were included in the study. In small-scale classroom-based research, such sample sizes are considered methodologically acceptable for capturing contextualized learning phenomena, particularly when complemented by qualitative data to enhance depth and interpretability.

For the qualitative phase, three students were purposively selected for in-depth interviews to represent varied learning experiences and engagement levels based on maximum variation sampling criteria, including

(1) high, medium, and low levels of questionnaire responses, (2) differing levels of classroom participation, and (3) varied engagement with problem-based tasks. This purposive sampling strategy aimed to capture diverse perspectives and ensure that the qualitative data reflected a range of learning experiences. In addition, one lecturer who taught the course was included to provide contextual insight into instructional implementation.

Instructional Materials and Learning Context

The instructional intervention was structured around three reading texts grounded in local wisdom from *Majalengka*. These included a narrative text titled *Nyi Rambut Kasih*, which draws on local legend; an expository text titled *Mapag Tamba*, which explains a traditional cultural practice; and a descriptive text titled *Terasing Panyaweuyan*. The intervention was conducted over three consecutive instructional sessions (approximately 100 minutes per session), each focusing on a single text and following a Problem-Based Learning cycle: problem orientation, group discussion, inquiry, and reflection. Each text was integrated into problem-based reading activities that required students to analyze information, interpret meaning, and collaboratively respond to contextualized problems.

Data Collection Procedures

Quantitative data were collected through a closed-ended Likert-scale questionnaire administered at the end of the instructional sequence. The questionnaire consisted of items measuring students' perceptions of reading comprehension processes, including identifying main ideas, making inferences, critical engagement, and learning motivation. Content validity was established through expert review, and the instrument demonstrated acceptable internal consistency, as indicated by Cronbach's Alpha coefficients exceeding the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70.

Qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews, reflective learning journals, and non-participant classroom observations. The semi-structured interview protocol explored students' experiences with reading instruction, engagement with local cultural content, perceived challenges, and how problem-based tasks shaped their comprehension processes. Classroom observations were guided by a structured protocol that focused on instructional stages, student participation, interaction patterns, and engagement with problem-based tasks. Field notes were systematically recorded during each session to ensure consistency and depth of observation.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including mean scores and distribution patterns, to capture overall tendencies in students' perceptions of instructional support. These results served as the basis for identifying areas requiring qualitative explanation. Qualitative data from interviews, reflective journals, and observation notes were analyzed thematically. The analysis followed a rigorous process involving data familiarization, initial coding, categorization, and theme development. To enhance trustworthiness, triangulation across multiple data sources (interviews, journals, and observations) was employed. To address the mixed-methods integration research question, qualitative themes were woven into the interpretation of quantitative results during the discussion stage, using a narrative weaving strategy that explicitly connects statistical trends with students' experiential accounts, thereby providing a comprehensive explanation of how local-wisdom-based PBL supports reading comprehension.

FINDINGS

The present study examined how EFL students perceived and experienced reading instruction recontextualized through local-wisdom-based Problem-Based Learning. The findings draw on both quantitative data from a closed-ended questionnaire and qualitative data from interviews, reflective journals, and classroom observations. The integration of these two strands provides a coherent explanation of how

students' perceptions were shaped by their lived learning experiences within culturally grounded problem-based reading activities.

The findings are organized into two interrelated themes: (1) students' perceived support for reading comprehension through local-wisdom-based PBL, and (2) students' lived experiences of engaging with reading tasks mediated by local cultural texts. Together, these findings explain both the level of perceived instructional support and the mechanisms through which such perceptions were constructed in classroom practice.

Students' Perceived Support for Reading Comprehension through Local-Wisdom-Based PBL

In line with the explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, the quantitative analysis focuses on identifying overall response patterns rather than causal relationships. Descriptive statistics were used to identify patterns in students' responses and to indicate which aspects of reading support were perceived most strongly.

Table 1. Students' Perceptions of Reading Comprehension Support through Local-Wisdom-Based PBL

No	Sub-theme	Statement	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
1	Text Understanding	The learning activities helped me understand the main ideas of the texts.	27	2	5	4.11	0.74
2	Inferential Reading	Problem-based questions helped me make inferences from the text.	27	2	5	3.96	0.81
3	Critical Reading	The tasks encouraged me to think critically about the text content.	27	2	5	3.89	0.85
4	Cultural Relevance	Local cultural content made the texts easier to understand.	27	3	5	4.26	0.68
5	Engagement	Learning through local-wisdom-based problems increased my interest in reading.	27	2	5	4.07	0.77

Quantitative results indicate that cultural relevance was the most strongly perceived dimension of support ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 0.68$), reflecting a high level of consensus among students. This pattern suggests that shared cultural knowledge functioned as a stabilizing interpretive resource, reducing cognitive effort in meaning construction. Text understanding was also strongly supported ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.74$), indicating that students were generally able to identify main ideas effectively. This suggests that problem-based tasks provided a clear organizational structure for global comprehension. Engagement was perceived positively ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 0.77$), though with moderate variability. This variation indicates that engagement was influenced not only by instructional design but also by individual participation in problem-solving processes.

Inferential ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.81$) and critical reading ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 0.85$) received lower, more variable ratings, reflecting the higher cognitive and linguistic demands of these processes. While problem-based tasks supported deeper meaning-making, students demonstrated uneven readiness to engage in inference and evaluation, indicating the need for sustained scaffolding.

Overall, the results reveal a progression from foundational support (cultural relevance and text understanding) to more complex cognitive engagement (inferential and critical reading). This gradient indicates that local-wisdom-based PBL is particularly effective in grounding comprehension and engagement, while its impact on higher-order reading remains conditional.

4.2 Students' Experiences of Reading Instruction Recontextualized through PBL and Local Wisdom

Addressing RQ2, qualitative findings explain how students experienced reading instruction within a culturally grounded PBL environment. A key pattern concerns the role of local cultural familiarity in supporting meaning-making. Students consistently reported that familiarity with local narratives, traditions, and places reduced interpretive difficulty and allowed them to focus on meaning construction rather than

contextual guessing (INT-S1; INT-S2; RJ-S3). This indicates that local wisdom functioned as a cognitive scaffold, aligning new linguistic input with existing schema.

A second pattern highlights how problem-based tasks reoriented students' reading purposes. Students described a shift from answering discrete comprehension questions to engaging in goal-oriented reading aimed at explaining and solving contextualized problems (INT-S1; INT-S2). This reorientation positioned reading as an active, inquiry-driven process.

A third pattern emphasizes collaborative negotiation as a central learning mechanism. Students reported that group discussions enabled them to clarify misunderstandings, negotiate interpretations, and refine meaning through peer interaction (INT-S3; RJ-S2). This indicates that comprehension was socially constructed rather than individually derived. Challenges related to language expression were framed as productive struggles that contributed to deeper understanding. Overall, reading was experienced as a culturally grounded, socially mediated, and problem-oriented process.

4.3 Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The integration of findings explains not only what students perceived, but also why these perceptions emerged within specific instructional conditions.

Table 2. Joint Display of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings on Local-Wisdom-Based PBL in EFL Reading

Quantitative Dimension (RQ1)	Key Quantitative Result (N = 27)	Corresponding Qualitative Evidence (RQ2)	Integrated Interpretation (RQ3)
Cultural Relevance	Highest perceived support (M = 4.26, SD = 0.68); no low-end responses	<p><i>"Because I already knew the story of Nyi Rambut Kasih, I could focus on understanding the meaning in English."</i> (INT-S1)</p> <p><i>"When reading Mapag Tamba, I understood the tradition first."</i> (INT-S2)</p>	Strong cultural familiarity reduced cognitive distance between the text and the reader, enabling students to allocate cognitive resources to comprehension rather than to contextual guessing. This explains the consistently high quantitative ratings.
Text Understanding	High support for identifying main ideas (M = 4.11, SD = 0.74)	<p><i>"I could imagine the place, so it was easier to understand the text."</i> (RJ-S3)</p> <p>Observation notes show students quickly identifying central ideas before discussion (Obs-1).</p>	Problem-based tasks combined with familiar contexts supported global comprehension by providing clear reading purposes and anchoring meaning in prior knowledge.
Engagement	Strong engagement trend (M = 4.07, SD = 0.77) with moderate variability	<p><i>"We did not just read to answer questions, but to explain the problem."</i> (INT-S2)</p> <p>Extended peer discussions were observed in Obs-2 and Obs-3.</p>	Engagement increased because reading was positioned as a means to solve meaningful, contextually relevant problems rather than as a routine comprehension exercise.

Quantitative Dimension (RQ1)	Key Quantitative Result (N = 27)	Corresponding Qualitative Evidence (RQ2)	Integrated Interpretation (RQ3)
Inferential Reading	Moderately high support (M = 3.96, SD = 0.81) with noticeable dispersion	<i>"The questions made us think about why the tradition is important."</i> (INT-S1) Students revisited texts to justify interpretations during group work (Obs-2).	Problem-based questions prompted inferential thinking, but students' ability to infer meaning varied by linguistic proficiency and confidence.
Critical Reading	Lowest mean but still positive (M = 3.89, SD = 0.85); highest variability	<i>"Sometimes my interpretation was different, but after discussion we found a better explanation."</i> (RJ-S2) Some students remained descriptive rather than evaluative (Obs-3).	Critical reading emerged unevenly, suggesting that while PBL created space for evaluation and reflection, students differed in readiness to move beyond comprehension and inference.

The joint display demonstrates how experiential mechanisms account for quantitative trends, revealing points of convergence and variation across dimensions. The strong convergence between high quantitative ratings and qualitative evidence indicates that cultural familiarity reduced cognitive load and stabilized comprehension processes. Global comprehension was supported by aligning problem-based tasks with students' prior knowledge, enabling efficient identification of main ideas. Engagement emerged as a function of task orientation, in which reading served to resolve meaningful problems rather than complete routine tasks. Partial convergence in inferential and critical reading suggests that while PBL created opportunities for higher-order thinking, students' enactment of these processes remained uneven and dependent on individual readiness.

Overall, the findings reveal a layered mechanism: local wisdom anchors comprehension, PBL sustains engagement through problem orientation, and higher-order reading emerges progressively but unevenly. This integrated explanation accounts for both the overall positive perceptions and the variability across reading dimensions.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that recontextualizing EFL reading instruction through local-wisdom-based Problem-Based Learning creates a learning environment that is both cognitively accessible and culturally meaningful for students. Rather than merely confirming prior findings on contextualized Learning, the results extend existing research by demonstrating that cultural familiarity functions as an active cognitive mechanism that stabilizes comprehension processes in EFL contexts. Specifically, local cultural content appears to reduce interpretive uncertainty, enabling learners to allocate cognitive resources toward meaning construction in the target language. This mechanism refines previous claims on schema activation by situating it within a structured PBL environment.

This culturally grounded orientation also explains why students reported strong support for understanding main ideas. When background knowledge is activated, comprehension shifts from effortful decoding to structured interpretation. From a cognitive perspective, this finding suggests a reduction in

extraneous cognitive load, allowing learners to focus on higher-level processing (Reimer et al., 2021; Taye & Teshome, 2025). This extends prior research by showing that local wisdom is not only a contextual feature but also a functional mechanism that optimizes cognitive processing in reading

Beyond comprehension, the findings demonstrate that Problem-Based Learning reshaped students' engagement with reading activities. Reading was experienced not as a passive decoding task, but as a purposeful activity oriented toward solving contextualized problems. Students read in order to explain cultural practices, interpret social meanings, and respond to locally grounded issues embedded in the texts (Hossain, 2024). While previous studies have established that PBL promotes engagement, the present findings specify how engagement is sustained—namely, through a problem-oriented approach that transforms reading into a goal-directed cognitive activity (Barak & Yuan, 2021; Razak et al., 2022). This suggests that engagement in EFL reading is not solely a function of task design, but of epistemic purpose; students read not to complete tasks, but to resolve meaningful problems.

The integration of local wisdom also strengthened engagement by positioning students' cultural knowledge as epistemically valid within the learning process (Caingcoy, 2024; Uge et al., 2019). The successful integration of local wisdom in this study reflects previous findings that in-depth reading comprehension requires the capacity to interpret cultural elements embedded in texts. A culture-based approach not only strengthens linguistic aspects but also significantly enhances students' cross-cultural intelligence (Muhria et al., 2025). This moves beyond culturally responsive pedagogy as a theoretical stance and demonstrates its operational role in shaping participation and meaning-making in EFL reading.

At the same time, the findings reveal greater variability in students' perceptions of support for inferential and critical reading. This variability indicates that higher-order reading does not emerge automatically from problem-based instruction, but depends on learners' readiness to engage in complex cognitive processes. (Amanda & Wahyuningsih, 2024; Manalu & Harahap, 2025). The findings, therefore, challenge the assumption that PBL alone is sufficient to develop higher-order reading skills, highlighting scaffolding as a mediating variable.

The uneven emergence of critical reading in this study suggests that while PBL created opportunities for evaluation and reflection, these opportunities were not uniformly realized by all students. Some learners remained focused on descriptive understanding, whereas others began to negotiate interpretations through discussion and justification (Hamma et al., 2023; Razak et al., 2022). Rather than simply aligning with prior studies, this finding specifies a boundary condition of PBL effectiveness—namely, that critical reading development is contingent upon sustained instructional support and iterative practice.

Finally, the findings suggest that local-wisdom-based PBL operates as a layered pedagogical approach. The results support a layered instructional mechanism: cultural relevance anchors comprehension, problem orientation sustains engagement, and collaborative inquiry enables the gradual emergence of higher-order reading. This model contributes to the literature by integrating cultural pedagogy and problem-based Learning into a unified explanatory framework for EFL reading comprehension.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be considered. First, the relatively small sample size ($N = 27$) limits the generalizability of the findings beyond the specific classroom context. Second, the study was conducted within a single institutional setting, which may not fully represent diverse EFL learning environments. Third, while the mixed-methods design provides depth of understanding, the absence of a control group restricts the ability to make causal claims regarding instructional effectiveness. Finally, the short duration of the intervention may not fully capture the long-term development of higher-order reading skills, particularly critical reading.

The findings of this study offer several practical implications for EFL reading instruction. First, integrating local wisdom into reading materials can serve as an effective strategy for reducing cognitive barriers and enhancing comprehension, particularly in contexts where learners struggle with abstract or unfamiliar content. Second, the use of Problem-Based Learning can transform reading into a purposeful and engaging activity by framing comprehension as part of problem-solving processes. However, the findings also indicate that higher-order reading skills require explicit scaffolding. Therefore, instructors should design

structured support mechanisms, such as guided questioning, modeling of inferential reasoning, and iterative reflection tasks, to facilitate the development of critical reading. Furthermore, integrating cultural content and PBL should be implemented systematically rather than incidentally. Instructional design should ensure alignment among cultural materials, problem scenarios, and learning objectives to maximize both engagement and comprehension.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that integrating local wisdom within a Problem-Based Learning (PBL) framework effectively recontextualizes EFL reading instruction, enhancing students' comprehension, engagement, and learning experiences. Students reported strong perceived support, particularly in cultural relevance, text understanding, and engagement, indicating that culturally familiar content functions as a cognitive scaffold that reduces interpretive difficulty and supports meaning construction. At the same time, PBL reorients reading as a purposeful, inquiry-driven activity, enabling students to engage with texts through problem-solving and collaborative interaction. However, the development of inferential and critical reading remains uneven, suggesting that higher-order comprehension requires sustained scaffolding beyond contextualization and problem orientation. Overall, the findings confirm that local-wisdom-based PBL provides a coherent instructional approach that bridges cultural relevance and cognitive engagement, while also highlighting the need for targeted pedagogical support to optimize higher-order reading development in EFL contexts.

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