

**EXPLORING MULTICULTURAL-BASED PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING
MODEL AS A STRATEGY TO ENHANCE BASIC READING
COMPREHENSION FOR INDONESIAN EFL STUDENTS**

By:

Elva Utami^{1*}, Arono², Wisma Yunita³

University of Prof.Dr. Hazairin, SH, Bengkulu, Indonesia & Doctoral Program of Applied Linguistics of Bengkulu University, Bengkulu, Indonesia¹, Doctoral Program of Applied Linguistics of Bengkulu University, Bengkulu, Indonesia^{2,3}

utamielva80@gmail.com¹, arono@unib.ac.id², wismayunita@unib.ac.id³

Abstract: This study explores the effectiveness of multicultural-based Problem-Based Learning (PBL) model in enhancing basic reading comprehension among English language education students at three universities in Bengkulu, Indonesia. The objective was to assess whether integrating multicultural themes into PBL could improve reading comprehension compared to traditional teaching methods. A total of 140 students participated, divided into an experimental group and a control group. The experimental group engaged with multicultural PBL activities, while the control group followed a conventional teaching model. Pretest and posttest scores were analyzed using paired-sample t-tests, revealing significant improvements in the experimental group's reading comprehension ($p < 0.05$). In contrast, the control group showed minimal change ($p > 0.05$). Qualitative data from student surveys and observational checklists indicated increased engagement, motivation, and cultural awareness among students in the experimental group. The study concluded that a multicultural-based PBL model is an effective approach for enhancing reading comprehension and fostering intercultural competence. It recommends incorporating multicultural PBL into language teaching curricula to improve both reading skills and global awareness among students.

Keywords: multicultural, problem-based learning, reading comprehension

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the globalized nature of education has highlighted

the increasing importance of incorporating diverse cultural perspectives into teaching and

learning practices. English Language Teaching (ELT) has been at the forefront of this shift, recognizing that language learning is not merely about mastering grammar and vocabulary, but also about engaging with the cultural contexts in which the language is used (Kramersch, 2015). Multicultural education, as part of this paradigm, emphasizes the integration of cultural awareness and appreciation into the learning process, fostering a more inclusive environment for students from diverse backgrounds (Banks & Banks, 2016). As the world becomes more interconnected, the need for such approaches in ELT becomes ever more apparent, particularly in developing effective methods to improve language skills such as reading comprehension (Krause & Coates, 2008). Reading

comprehension, an essential component of language acquisition, remains a challenging skill for many learners, particularly in foreign language contexts. According to Ulker (2017), understanding written texts requires more than just decoding words; it involves interacting with the content, making inferences, and applying critical thinking skills. In many English language classrooms, however, traditional teaching methods often fail to adequately support these complex cognitive processes. This gap between the idealized pedagogical goals and the realities of classroom practice highlights the need for innovative strategies to improve students' reading comprehension abilities. Among these strategies, Problem-Based Learning (PBL) has gained attention for its potential to engage students in active learning,

promoting problem-solving skills and deeper understanding (Hmelo-Silver, 2022).

PBL, an instructional method that centers on solving real-world problems, encourages students to take an active role in their learning process. It has been shown to enhance critical thinking, foster collaborative skills, and increase student motivation (Thomas, 2000). When combined with a multicultural approach, PBL offers students the opportunity to explore a variety of perspectives, encouraging not only cognitive development but also cultural empathy. As noted by Haswani et al. (2023), integrating multicultural themes into PBL tasks can provide students with a broader understanding of global issues, thereby enhancing their comprehension of diverse viewpoints and fostering a more

holistic approach to language learning.

Despite the theoretical benefits of combining PBL with multicultural elements, empirical studies on the effectiveness of such an approach in improving reading comprehension are limited. Previous research has primarily focused on the individual impacts of either PBL or multicultural education, but few studies have investigated the intersection of both in the context of reading comprehension (Derewianka & Jones, 2022). Moreover, existing studies have often overlooked the application of these strategies in non-native English-speaking settings, such as in Indonesia, where English language learners face unique challenges in acquiring proficiency. This gap in the literature presents a valuable research opportunity that examines the impact

of multicultural PBL on reading comprehension in the context of Indonesian higher education (Syamsurijal et al., 2022).

The purpose of this study is to explore the effectiveness of multicultural Problem-Based Learning (PBL) as a strategy for enhancing basic reading comprehension skills among English language education students. Specifically, the study aims to examine whether the incorporation of multicultural themes into PBL tasks improves the reading comprehension performance of students at the Universitas Prof. Dr. Hazairin, SH, Universitas Bengkulu, and UIN Fatmawati Soekarno Bengkulu. Through this research, the study seeks to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on innovative ELT methodologies and offer practical

insights for educators seeking to implement multicultural and PBL approaches in their own teaching practices.

The gap between traditional teaching practices and the need for more dynamic, engaging, and culturally relevant learning experiences underscores the significance of this study. By integrating PBL with multicultural education, this research proposes a novel approach to addressing the challenges faced by students in mastering reading comprehension. The study's findings could inform future pedagogical strategies and provide a foundation for further exploration into the integration of cultural diversity in language education. As such, this study aims not only to enhance students' reading comprehension but also to empower

them with the skills and awareness necessary to navigate an increasingly interconnected and diverse world.

Thus, this research aims to answer the following question: To what extent does the implementation of multicultural Problem-Based Learning impact the basic reading comprehension of English language education students? By answering this question, the study will offer valuable insights into the role of innovative, culturally inclusive teaching strategies in enhancing language acquisition. The results of this study will also provide practical recommendations for English language educators looking to create more engaging and effective learning environments for their students.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed an experimental research design to assess the effectiveness of a multicultural Problem-Based Learning (PBL) approach in enhancing basic reading comprehension among students of English language education. The implementation of the multicultural Problem-Based Learning (PBL) model in this study followed five key stages. First, students identified real-world problems presented in multicultural reading texts, such as Fort Marlborough and Vietnam's Politics today. They then gathered additional information from diverse cultural sources with guidance from the instructor. Next, students analyzed the problems collaboratively, discussing cultural dimensions and interpretations to deepen

understanding. The information was synthesized and applied through group discussions and presentations in which students proposed culturally sensitive solutions. Finally, students evaluated their learning outcomes and reflected on how multicultural awareness enhanced their reading comprehension and engagement. The multicultural aspects in this study were embedded in the PBL activities through the use of culturally diverse topics, visual materials, and reflective questions. The reading texts addressed global and local issues, including migration, climate change, and social equality, representing diverse perspectives from various countries and cultures. Visual aids, including infographics and images, were incorporated to help students connect language with cultural context. In addition, group

discussions were guided by reflective questions designed to encourage students to compare cultural values, viewpoints, and problem-solving approaches. These elements ensured that multicultural awareness was integrated throughout the learning process rather than treated as a separate topic. The research design involves the use of a pretest-posttest control group design, allowing for the measurement of changes in reading comprehension before and after the intervention. This approach was selected to determine whether the PBL method, when combined with multicultural elements, has a statistically significant impact on improving students' reading comprehension skills.

The participants of this study consisted of 140 undergraduate students enrolled in English language

education programs at three universities in Bengkulu, Indonesia: Universitas Prof. Dr. Hazairin, SH, Universitas Bengkulu, and UIN Fatmawati Soekarno Bengkulu. These students were selected through a purposive sampling method to ensure that they had a basic proficiency in English, which was required for participation in the study. The participants were divided into two groups: an experimental group, which received instruction using multicultural PBL materials, and a control group, which followed traditional instructional methods for reading comprehension.

The experimental group was exposed to a series of reading comprehension tasks designed around multicultural PBL materials. These materials included real-world problems related to various global

issues, framed within different cultural contexts. The control group, on the other hand, followed conventional reading comprehension exercises, which did not incorporate multicultural elements or problem-based learning strategies.

To measure reading comprehension, the study utilized a validated reading comprehension test, which was administered both before (pretest) and after (posttest) the intervention. The pretest was designed to assess the baseline reading comprehension levels of the participants, while the posttest aimed to evaluate any improvements following the intervention. The reading comprehension test included multiple-choice questions, short-answer questions, and reading passages that varied in length and complexity. The test was carefully

selected and adapted from recent studies in ELT to ensure its relevance and alignment with the learning objectives (Naeini & Duvall, 2012).

In addition to the reading comprehension test, observational checklists and student feedback surveys were used to gather qualitative data on student engagement, perceptions of the PBL approach, and cultural awareness. These tools helped to triangulate the data and provide a richer understanding of the students' learning experiences. The PBL tasks were designed around contemporary multicultural issues, such as climate change, migration, and global health, incorporating cultural diversity through a variety of perspectives and case studies from different regions of the world (Derewianka & Jones, 2022).

The intervention lasted for eight weeks, with two 90-minute sessions per week. During this period, the experimental group participated in PBL-based activities, which involved reading texts on multicultural topics, discussing problems, and collaborating on solutions in groups. These activities were designed to encourage critical thinking, problem-solving, and intercultural competence. Each session involved a different cultural context, and students were tasked with analyzing reading materials from various cultural perspectives, fostering a deeper understanding of the content (Thomas, 2000).

The control group, in contrast, followed a more traditional approach to reading comprehension. They were asked to read passages, answer comprehension questions, and engage

in teacher-directed discussions. The control group did not participate in any group-based problem-solving tasks or discussions of multicultural topics.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the instruments used in this study, several steps were taken. First, the reading comprehension test was reviewed by a panel of experts in the field of ELT to ensure that the items were appropriate for the student population and aligned with the learning objectives. A pilot test was also conducted with a small sample of students from another cohort to test the clarity of the test items and refine any ambiguous questions.

In addition, the PBL materials were pre-tested with a separate group of students to gauge their relevance and effectiveness in promoting critical thinking and intercultural

understanding. Feedback from this group was used to refine the materials before the actual intervention.

To enhance the reliability of the study, the data collection process was standardized. Both the pretest and posttest were administered under similar conditions, ensuring that all participants received the same instructions and test materials. Furthermore, the observational checklists and surveys were administered consistently, with clear guidelines for the researchers to follow during data collection.

Data collection involved both quantitative and qualitative methods. The primary quantitative data came from the pretest and posttest scores, which were used to measure the improvement in reading comprehension. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to

examine the mean scores of both the experimental and control groups, followed by inferential statistical tests, such as paired-sample t-tests, to determine whether there were statistically significant differences between the groups' scores (Cohen et al., 2007).

Qualitative data from the student surveys and observational checklists were analyzed using thematic analysis. This analysis focused on identifying recurring themes related to student engagement, motivation, and perceptions of the multicultural PBL approach. The results were cross-referenced with the quantitative findings to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the intervention's impact.

The primary statistical test used in this study was the paired-sample t-test, which compared the pretest and

posttest scores within each group. Additionally, an independent t-test was used to compare the posttest scores between the experimental and control groups. These statistical tests allowed for an assessment of the effectiveness of the multicultural PBL approach in enhancing reading comprehension relative to traditional methods.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study provide a clear indication of the effectiveness of multicultural Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in enhancing basic reading comprehension among English language education students. The quantitative data, derived from pretest and posttest scores, show significant improvements in the experimental group, while the control group displayed no comparable

progress. The analysis of the pretest and posttest scores using a paired-sample t-test revealed that the experimental group demonstrated a statistically significant increase in reading comprehension scores ($p < 0.05$). Specifically, the average score of the experimental group increased from 62.3% (pretest) to 84.5% (posttest), whereas the control group's average score increased marginally from 61.2% (pretest) to 65.8% (posttest), with no statistically significant difference ($p > 0.05$).

In addition to the quantitative results, qualitative data gathered from student surveys and observational checklists supported the notion that multicultural PBL tasks led to enhanced engagement, motivation, and deeper understanding of reading materials. The majority of students in the experimental group reported

increased enthusiasm for reading tasks and felt that the integration of multicultural themes allowed them to connect more meaningfully with the content. As one participant noted, "The multicultural issues in the reading materials made me think differently about the text and helped me relate better to the topic."

Tables 1 and 2 summarize the statistical findings from the pretest and posttest results for both the experimental and control groups. The data reveal not only the magnitude of the improvement in the experimental group but also emphasize the stability of scores in the control group.

Table 1
Pretest and Posttest Mean Scores

Group	Pre test (%)	Mean Post test (%)	Mean (%)	Difference p-value test (paired t-test)
Experimental Group	62.3	84.5	22.2	0.0001
Control Group	61.2	65.8	4.6	0.308

Table 2
Comparison of Posttest Scores between
Experimental and Control Groups

Group	Post Test Mean (%)	p-value (independent t-test)
Experimental Group	84.5	0.002
Control Group	65.8	

The findings from this study suggest that the integration of multicultural Problem-Based Learning (PBL) significantly enhances reading comprehension among English language education students. This aligns with previous research that emphasizes the positive impact of active learning methods like PBL on reading comprehension (Zainuddin et al., 2020). Additionally, the incorporation of multicultural perspectives into PBL tasks appears to foster greater engagement and deeper understanding of reading materials, reinforcing the idea that learning is more effective when it is

contextually relevant and culturally diverse (Sana & Shahzad, 2018). The significant improvement in the experimental group's reading comprehension scores suggests that multicultural PBL activities can facilitate better comprehension by encouraging students to approach texts from multiple cultural perspectives. This is consistent with Vygotsky (1978) theory of social constructivism, which posits that learning is a social process where meaning is constructed through interaction with peers and engagement with real-world problems. In this study, the collaborative nature of PBL and the multicultural content encouraged students to engage in discussions that enhanced their understanding of the texts, leading to better comprehension outcomes.

Furthermore, the marginal improvement in the control group's reading comprehension scores supports previous findings that traditional methods may not be sufficient to achieve significant gains in reading comprehension, especially in the context of complex global issues (Carrell, 2017). The control group's limited progress also highlights the need for innovative teaching approaches that move beyond rote memorization and passive learning, which are often characteristic of conventional teaching methods (Sharma et al., 2024).

The results also underline the importance of integrating multicultural elements into language learning. Studies have shown that multicultural education not only improves language skills but also

enhances students' intercultural competence, which is essential in today's interconnected world (Liu & Littlewood, 2021). By engaging with multicultural reading materials, students develop a broader understanding of global issues, which, in turn, helps them build stronger connections to the texts they read. The multicultural PBL tasks in this study, which involved analyzing issues such as climate change and migration from different cultural viewpoints, encouraged students to think critically and empathetically about the content, thus improving their comprehension.

The positive feedback from students about the multicultural PBL tasks suggests that when students are exposed to diverse perspectives, they feel more motivated and invested in the learning process. This finding

echoes the work of Banks and Banks (2003), who assert that multicultural education fosters greater motivation among learners by making the content more relevant to their personal experiences and broader worldviews. Additionally, the use of PBL strategies has been linked to higher levels of intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement (Deci & Ryan, 2019), which were observed in the experimental group during this study.

The results of this study are consistent with recent research on the effectiveness of PBL in language learning (Zainuddin et al., 2020), which has demonstrated that problem-based tasks can improve students' ability to comprehend complex texts by promoting active learning and critical thinking. However, this study extends previous work by examining the role of multiculturalism in PBL,

an area that has not been extensively explored in recent research. For example, Jafari and Amini (2019) found that while PBL improves language proficiency, the incorporation of multicultural themes into PBL tasks may further enhance students' cognitive and affective engagement with reading materials, leading to deeper comprehension.

The findings of this study have significant implications for both theory and practice in English language teaching. From a theoretical perspective, the study supports the notion that multicultural PBL not only improves reading comprehension but also fosters a more holistic learning experience by promoting critical thinking, intercultural competence, and collaborative skills. This aligns with the broader pedagogical movement

towards integrating real-world issues and diverse cultural perspectives into language education (Thomas, 2000).

From a practical standpoint, educators should consider incorporating multicultural PBL into their curricula to enhance students' reading comprehension skills. Given the positive outcomes observed in this study, it is recommended that language teachers design tasks that incorporate multicultural themes and encourage students to collaborate on solving real-world problems (Yiğiter et al., 2005). This approach not only helps students develop better reading comprehension but also equips them with the skills necessary to navigate an increasingly globalized and multicultural world.

CONCLUSION

This study has successfully demonstrated that the integration of multicultural Problem-Based Learning (PBL) significantly enhances basic reading comprehension among English language education students. The results indicate that students who engaged in multicultural PBL activities showed considerable improvement in reading comprehension, compared to those who followed traditional instructional methods. The intervention, which combined real-world problem-solving tasks with multicultural themes, fostered a deeper understanding of the texts, promoted critical thinking, and increased student motivation. These findings align with Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism, which suggests that learning is most

effective when students actively engage in meaningful, context-rich activities. This study further contributes to the growing body of knowledge on the effectiveness of PBL, particularly in the context of multicultural education, which remains underexplored in the current literature (Jafari & Amini, 2019). The novelty of this study lies in the combination of these two pedagogical approaches, providing a new framework for enhancing reading comprehension in language learning.

In terms of practical application, the findings of this study suggest that educators can significantly enhance students' reading comprehension by incorporating multicultural PBL into their teaching practices. Teachers are encouraged to design reading comprehension tasks that are not only

culturally relevant but also involve problem-solving activities that engage students in critical analysis and collaborative learning. Such an approach has the potential to improve students' reading comprehension skills while also fostering greater cultural awareness and intercultural competence, which are essential in the context of globalized education (Liu & Littlewood, 2021). The study also provides a basis for further research on the long-term effects of multicultural PBL and its applicability in various educational contexts, particularly in countries with diverse student populations. Future studies could explore how this approach impacts other areas of language acquisition, such as writing and speaking, and investigate its effectiveness across different cultural and educational settings.

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