



Culturally Responsive English Language Teaching Through Dayak Punan Oral Tradition: A study of Vocabulary Acquisition in a Remote Primary School

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ABSTRACT

This study explores vocabulary acquisition outcomes and learner perceptions among fourth-grade students at SDN 005 Mentarang, a remotely situated primary school in Kalimantan, following instruction delivered through a culturally responsive English Language Teaching (ELT) framework built on Dayak Punan oral traditions. Adopting a descriptive quantitative design, the investigation drew on two data sources: a structured vocabulary test and a five-item Likert-scale perception questionnaire administered to thirty purposively selected participants. The vocabulary test yielded a class mean of 74.67, with 66.67% of students satisfying the Minimum Mastery Criterion (KKM) and 63.33% attaining Good or Excellent proficiency ratings. Questionnaire analysis produced a strongly positive aggregate reception, with 89.86% of all responses falling within the Agree or Strongly Agree categories; items measuring learning motivation (96.5%) These findings affirm the instructional value of anchoring English vocabulary teaching in indigenous cultural materials and carry meaningful implications for ELT curriculum development in geographically remote and culturally distinct Indonesian learning environments.

Keywords: *vocabulary acquisition, culturally responsive teaching, Dayak Punan oral traditions, English Language Teaching, remote primary school.*

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INTRODUCTION

The centrality of vocabulary to language competence is a matter of broad scholarly consensus. Across diverse EFL research traditions, the absence of an adequate lexical base has been repeatedly shown to impede learners' ability to participate productively in reading, writing, listening, and speaking activities, irrespective of their command of grammatical structures (Zeng et al., 2025). These challenges intensify when instructional content is constructed without regard for the lived realities of the learners it targets a condition that remains prevalent in many remote and indigenous community schooling contexts. In such settings, the distance between school language and home experience is not an incidental pedagogical inconvenience but a structural barrier with identifiable cognitive consequences. Research in the tradition of culturally responsive teaching has consistently established that new knowledge is processed and retained more effectively when learners can connect incoming information to the cognitive and cultural framework they bring to the classroom (Ogodo, 2024). When vocabulary instruction is designed without attention to these existing schemata, the processing burden on learners is elevated, and the conditions for durable lexical encoding are correspondingly diminished particularly for younger learners whose metalinguistic capacities are still maturing (Hofer et al., 2025).

SDN 005 Mentarang, a primary school in a remote area of North Kalimantan, exemplifies this structural challenge with particular clarity. The student body is predominantly composed of children from the Dayak Punan community, an indigenous group whose cultural identity is deeply rooted in a tradition of oral narrative and communal storytelling. This cultural heritage, however, remains largely unrepresented in the school's English language curriculum, which continues to rely on materials that bear little resemblance to the ecological, social, or linguistic worlds students inhabit. The Dayak Punan oral tradition presents a compelling instructional resource for culturally responsive ELT.

“Culturally responsive teaching connects prior knowledge with new language, making vocabulary learning more meaningful and memorable.”

Its narratives are lexically rich, structurally repetitive, and contextually embedded in ways that are known to support vocabulary retention (Wiysahnyuy & Valentine, 2023). The familiarity of these cultural materials carries a cognitive advantage: when new English words are introduced through narratives already known and valued by learners, the pathway from unfamiliar word to retained meaning is cognitively shortened, and the motivational conditions for engagement are correspondingly enhanced (Kristiawan et al., 2022). This instructional logic is grounded not in cultural sentiment alone but in established theories of language acquisition and cognitive processing. Empirical inquiry into culturally responsive ELT practice in remote Indonesian settings and specifically through indigenous oral traditions remains sparse. The majority of available studies have been conducted in urban or semi-urban contexts, leaving the dynamics of culturally grounded vocabulary instruction in rural indigenous schooling environments substantially under-examined. The present study addresses this gap by investigating the vocabulary mastery and learner

perceptions of thirty fourth-grade students at SDN 005 Mentarang following instruction delivered through Dayak Punan oral traditions, guided by two research questions: (1) To what extent do fourth-grade students at SDN 005 Mentarang demonstrate vocabulary mastery, as reflected in their test scores and their attainment of the KKM threshold, following culturally responsive ELT instruction grounded in Dayak Punan oral traditions? (2) What are students' perceptions of this instructional approach across the five experiential dimensions assessed by the questionnaire, including their motivation to learn, ability to retain newly acquired vocabulary, and engagement with cultural vocabulary associations introduced through the instruction? The study's significance is both theoretical and practical. At a theoretical level, it extends schema theory and culturally responsive teaching frameworks into a previously underexplored indigenous setting. At a practical level, it offers insights relevant to teachers, curriculum designers, and educational policymakers engaged with remote Indonesian schools, for whom the findings may inform how local oral traditions can be drawn upon as a resource for English vocabulary instruction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Culturally Responsive Approaches in English Language Teaching

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) has emerged as an influential framework for addressing cultural diversity in educational contexts. CRT emphasizes the importance of recognizing students' cultural identities, community experiences, and social backgrounds as valuable resources in the learning process (Nguyen & Huynh, 2023). Rather than assuming that learning occurs in culturally neutral environments, CRT acknowledges that teaching and learning are inherently shaped by sociocultural contexts. Within English Language Teaching (ELT), culturally responsive pedagogy seeks to bridge the gap between global English instruction and learners' local realities. Traditional ELT materials often reflect dominant cultural perspectives, particularly Western or urban contexts, which may not resonate with learners from rural or indigenous communities. When instructional materials fail to reflect students' cultural experiences, learners may find it difficult to connect with the language being taught, which can negatively affect engagement and learning outcomes (Sulistiyo et al., 2021).

Recent research demonstrates that culturally responsive ELT can enhance both linguistic development and learner engagement. By integrating culturally relevant content into language instruction, teachers can create more meaningful learning experiences that allow students to connect new language knowledge with their prior cultural understanding (Fauzi et al., 2026). This approach is particularly important in multilingual and indigenous educational settings, where cultural identity plays a central role in shaping students' learning experiences (Ogodo, 2024).

Indigenous Knowledge and Local Cultural Resources in Education

Indigenous knowledge systems represent important sources of cultural knowledge that have historically been transmitted through community practices, oral communication, and collective traditions. These systems include environmental knowledge, social values,

traditional narratives, and cultural practices that reflect the lived experiences of indigenous communities (Schroeder et al., 2022). In many indigenous societies, knowledge transmission occurs primarily through oral traditions such as storytelling, folklore, and community narratives. These oral forms of knowledge not only preserve cultural heritage but also function as informal educational mechanisms that shape social identity and collective memory (Schroeder et al., 2022). Within the Indonesian context, the Dayak Punan community represents an indigenous group whose cultural practices remain closely connected to forest ecosystems and traditional livelihoods. Oral storytelling plays a significant role in transmitting ecological knowledge, historical narratives, and moral values within the community (Antang et al., 2026). These narratives therefore represent valuable cultural resources that can potentially enrich educational practices.

However, despite their educational potential, indigenous knowledge systems are rarely integrated into formal school curricula. Many educational institutions continue to rely on standardized materials that prioritize national or global perspectives while overlooking local cultural knowledge. As a result, indigenous learners may experience a disconnect between school learning and their everyday cultural environments (Schroeder et al., 2022). Integrating indigenous knowledge into classroom instruction has therefore been increasingly recommended as a strategy for creating more culturally relevant and inclusive learning environments.

Storytelling and Vocabulary Learning in EFL Contexts

Storytelling has long been recognized as an effective instructional strategy in language education. Narratives provide meaningful linguistic contexts in which vocabulary items are embedded within coherent story structures. Through narrative exposure, learners encounter vocabulary within meaningful communicative situations, allowing them to infer word meanings through contextual clues and narrative sequences (Zeng et al., 2025). Compared with isolated vocabulary memorization, narrative-based learning encourages deeper cognitive processing of language. Storytelling activities expose learners to repeated lexical patterns, descriptive expressions, and narrative discourse structures that support vocabulary retention and language comprehension (Wiysahnyuy & Valentine, 2023).

Recent studies in English language education have shown that storytelling-based instruction can significantly enhance vocabulary acquisition, oral language development, and student engagement. Narrative-based approaches, including digital storytelling and culturally grounded narratives, allow learners to experience language in authentic communicative contexts while strengthening their connection to the learning material (Kristiawan et al., 2022). The benefits of storytelling may become even more significant when narratives originate from learners' own cultural traditions. Culturally familiar stories allow students to activate prior knowledge and relate new vocabulary to their personal experiences, which supports comprehension and memory retention. Consequently, integrating local storytelling traditions into English language instruction can serve as an effective strategy for both vocabulary development and culturally responsive pedagogy (Fauzi et al., 2026).

Research Gap

Although previous studies have explored culturally responsive pedagogy, indigenous knowledge integration, and storytelling-based language learning, limited research has specifically examined the pedagogical use of indigenous oral traditions in English vocabulary instruction within remote Indonesian contexts. In particular, the role of Dayak Punan oral storytelling traditions as culturally relevant resources for English language learning has received minimal scholarly attention. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by investigating how the integration of Dayak Punan oral narratives into English language instruction can support vocabulary acquisition among students in remote areas of North Kalimantan. Given the limited empirical groundwork in this specific context, the present study adopts a descriptive approach, aiming to document students' vocabulary mastery and perceptions following this instruction rather than to establish causal or comparative claims. By examining the pedagogical potential of culturally grounded storytelling, this research seeks to contribute to the development of more contextually responsive ELT practices in indigenous educational settings.

METHOD

Research Design and Context

This investigation adopted a descriptive quantitative design, which Creswell and Creswell (2023) characterise as an approach appropriate to the systematic measurement and description of variables through numerical data rather than causal inference through experimental manipulation. It is important to note at the outset that this design employed a single-group, post-intervention structure: no pretest or baseline vocabulary measure was administered prior to the instructional intervention, and no comparison or control group was included. A naturalistic classroom context was maintained throughout the data collection process, enabling findings to reflect students' actual vocabulary achievement and learning perceptions under ordinary instructional conditions rather than under artificially controlled circumstances (Fraenkel et al., 2022). Yu et al. (2022) describes this orientation as characteristic of descriptive research, which aims to document phenomena as they naturally occur. This design was selected as the most appropriate match for the study's purpose: to provide a clear and accurate account of vocabulary mastery outcomes and learner perceptions following a specified instructional intervention.

Participants

The study was carried out at SDN 005 Mentarang, a primary school serving a remote area of North Kalimantan, with a broader target population of 74 upper primary students across Grades 3 to 6. From this population, a sample of 30 fourth-grade students was drawn through purposive sampling. Fourth-grade learners were identified as the optimal cohort for this study on developmental and pedagogical grounds: students at this stage demonstrate growing metalinguistic awareness and an increasing capacity to engage with contextually rich instructional materials, while their vocabulary repertoire remains sufficiently developmental for instructional intervention to be meaningfully associated with observed differences in vocabulary outcomes (Hofer et al., 2025). This profile is well-aligned

with the principles of culturally responsive teaching, which emphasise the importance of building on learners' existing cultural schemata to scaffold the acquisition of new knowledge (Ogodo, 2024).

Data Collection

Two complementary instruments were employed to gather data. The first was a structured vocabulary test comprising multiple-choice questions, word-matching tasks, and meaning identification exercises, all contextualised within Dayak Punan oral traditions to maintain alignment with the culturally responsive instructional framework. Each correct response was awarded five points, enabling the derivation of total and class mean scores as indicators of vocabulary mastery. Vocabulary testing of this format is well-established in language evaluation research as a means of gauging learners' proficiency and comprehension (Drown et al., 2023). The second instrument was a five-item perception questionnaire administered following the vocabulary test. Its five items addressed the following dimensions of the culturally responsive learning experience: (1) cultural vocabulary association, (2) contextual vocabulary comprehension, (3) classroom engagement, (4) learning motivation, and (5) vocabulary retention. Responses were gathered using a four-point Likert scale, ranging from Strongly Disagree (SD = 1) to Strongly Agree (SA = 4), with the deliberate exclusion of a neutral midpoint in order to encourage definitive attitudinal positioning and minimise central tendency bias (Kusmaryono et al., 2022). As with the vocabulary test, a reliability statistic such as Cronbach's alpha was not computed for this questionnaire; this represents a further limitation, and future studies employing this instrument would benefit from establishing its internal consistency. The instrument was reviewed by the classroom teacher prior to administration to confirm the age-appropriateness of the language used and the cultural suitability of each item. Both instruments were designed to yield mutually informative data: the vocabulary test providing a performance-based measure of mastery, and the questionnaire capturing the affective and experiential dimensions of students' engagement with the instructional approach. The raw questionnaire responses from all 30 participants were recorded across five dimensions using a four-point Likert scale (SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree). The data below represent the compiled item-by-item counts derived from individual student records. Two items (Q2 and Q4) recorded one missing entry each, yielding valid $n = 29$ for those items.

Table 1
Vocabulary Classification

Score Range	Criteria
90-100	Excellent
75-89	Good
60-74	Fair
50-59	Poor
0-49	Very Poor

Students' scores were classified into categories (adapted from language assessment frameworks): Language assessment classification helps interpret learners' proficiency levels (Glenn Fulcher, 2024).

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were employed throughout to summarize and interpret the collected data (Field, 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Vocabulary test data were subjected to three complementary analytical procedures: calculation of the class mean score, percentage analysis relative to the Minimum Mastery Criterion (KKM), and proficiency classification using a five-category scoring framework adapted from Fulcher (2024). Questionnaire responses were analysed through frequency tabulation and percentage calculation for each item individually and across all items in aggregate. This multi-procedure approach was adopted in recognition of Fraenkel et al.'s (2022) observation that any single analytic measure is insufficient to capture the full complexity of performance and perception data in classroom research: mean scores mask distributional variation, while item-level percentages may obscure broader patterns visible only at the aggregate level. The combination of these procedures was intended to generate a more complete and interpretively nuanced account of the study's findings.

FINDINGS

Vocabulary Test Results

The vocabulary test administered to 30 participants generated a total accumulated score of 2,240, from which a class mean of 74.67 was derived. This mean indicates that students, as a group, demonstrated a level of vocabulary mastery that modestly exceeds the minimum expected standard, though the aggregate figure alone does not convey the degree of within-class variation. Percentage analysis conducted according to the formula $P = (F/N) \times 100\%$ determined that 20 of the 30 students (66.67%) met or exceeded the KKM threshold, while the remaining 10 students (33.33%) fell below the required minimum. This distributional finding qualifies the mean score: while the average suggests moderate overall achievement, the non-trivial proportion of students below criterion underscores the need for differentiated instructional support within the class.

Table 2

Vocabulary Test Score Classification and Frequency Distribution

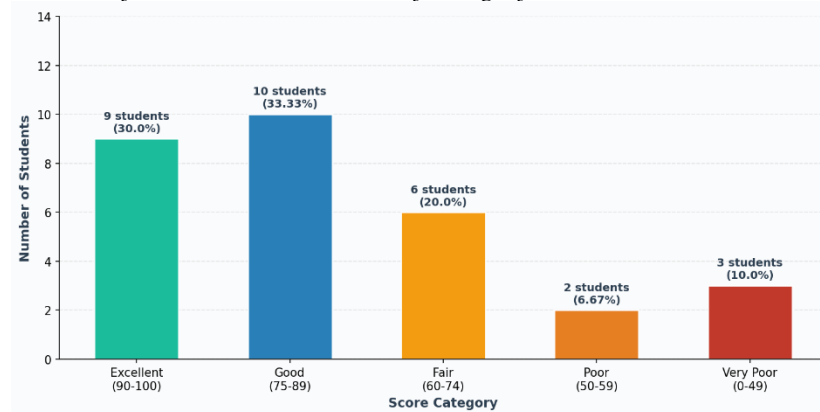
Score Range	Category	Frequency	Percentage
90–100	Excellent	9	30.00%
75–89	Good	10	33.33%
60–74	Fair	6	20.00%
50–59	Poor	2	6.67%
0–49	Very Poor	3	10.00%
Total		30	100%

As Table 2 and the score classification chart below illustrate, the distribution of student performance is meaningfully differentiated. Thirty percent of the class ($n = 9$) attained Excellent-level scores, and a further 33.33% ($n = 10$) achieved Good-level scores together accounting for 63.33% of participants who demonstrated satisfactory or strong vocabulary mastery. Concurrently, 36.67% of students ($n = 11$) fell within the Fair, Poor, or Very

Poor categories, confirming that a significant minority has yet to reach a level of vocabulary mastery sufficient to support confident English communication. This distributional picture is an important dimension of the findings that the class mean alone would obscure.

Figure 1.

Vocabulary Test Score Distribution by Category



Questionnaire Findings

The five-item perception questionnaire was completed by all 30 participants, with two items (Q2 and Q4) each recording one missing response. Across the 148 total valid responses collected, 74 (50.00%) fell in the Agree category and 59 (39.86%) in the Strongly Agree category, producing an aggregate positive response rate of 89.86%. Negative responses comprising 10 Disagree entries (6.76%) and 5 Strongly Disagree entries (3.38%) accounted for just 10.14% of all responses. This distribution reflects a strong and consistent endorsement of the culturally responsive instructional approach across all five dimensions assessed.

Figure 2.

Overall Distribution of Questionnaire Responses by Category

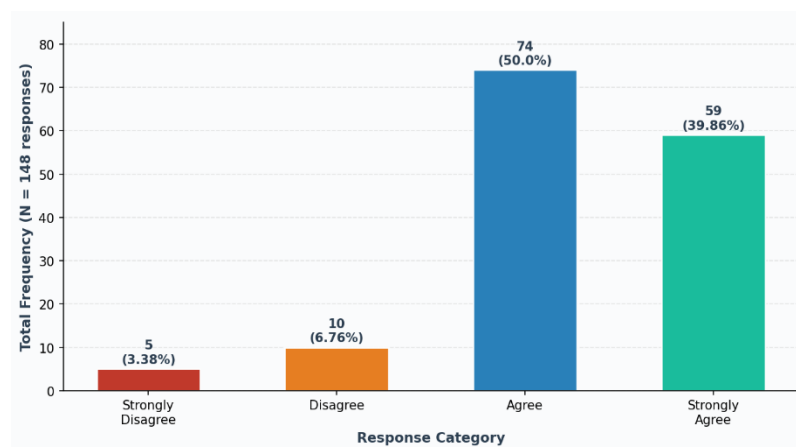
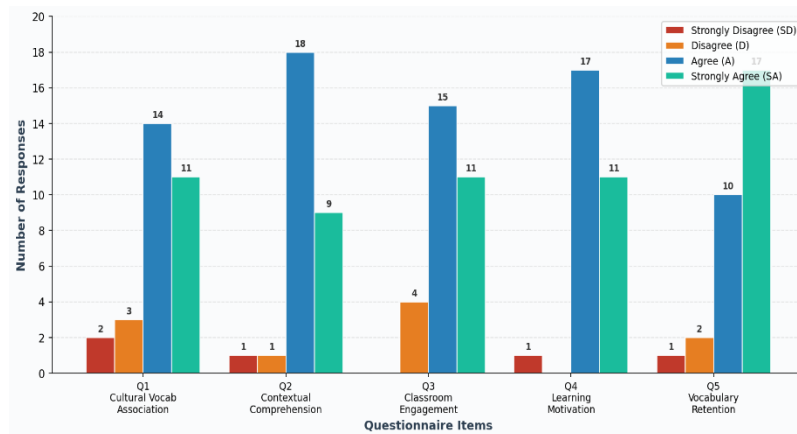


Figure 3.
Student Response Distribution Across All Five Questionnaire Items



Item-level analysis reveals patterns of interest that aggregate figures do not fully capture. Item 4, measuring learning motivation, produced the strongest endorsement of any item, with 96.5% of responses falling in the positive categories and not a single Disagree response recorded. Item 5, addressing vocabulary retention, yielded the highest proportion of Strongly Agree responses across the questionnaire 56.7% indicating that students hold a particularly firm conviction that culturally grounded instruction supports their ability to retain newly learned vocabulary. Items 1 and 3 produced the comparatively highest proportions of negative responses at 16.7% and 13.3% respectively, suggesting some variation in the degree to which individual students experienced cultural vocabulary associations and classroom engagement. These item-level nuances are discussed in greater depth in the following section.

DISCUSSION

The class mean of 74.67 and the 66.67% KKM attainment rate indicate a moderate level of aggregate vocabulary performance. When read in conjunction with the score classification data which show that 63.33% of students achieved Good or Excellent ratings these figures suggest that the culturally responsive instructional approach was effective in supporting vocabulary development for the majority of the class. Although the descriptive, single-group, post-instruction design of this study means that that this interpretation should be read as plausible rather than demonstrated. These results are broadly consistent with comparable studies of CRT-informed vocabulary instruction, in which the use of culturally familiar materials tends to produce above-average performance outcomes relative to approaches relying on contextually decontextualised content (Anyichie & Butler, 2023; Hammond, 2020). A schema-theoretic account offers one plausible explanation for this pattern. When students encounter new English vocabulary embedded in the oral narratives of their own community, the cultural schemata activated by those narratives reduce the cognitive effort required to attach meaning to form. Rather than arriving as isolated units

demanding effortful memorisation, new words enter the learner's mental lexicon through associative pathways already opened by cultural familiarity (Hattan, Alexander, & Lupo, 2024). Zeng et al.'s (2025) synthesis of the principle that vocabulary is most durably acquired through meaning-focused input in rich contextual environments though the present design cannot confirm this mechanism directly is directly realised in this instructional design.

The finding that 33.33% of students did not attain the KKM warrants careful consideration. The presence of a meaningful underperforming minority within a class that otherwise showed moderate achievement is consistent with what Fraenkel et al. (2022) term the masking effect of mean scores in heterogeneous groups. While Dayak Punan oral traditions provided effective scaffolding for most learners, variation in individual students' prior exposure to specific oral tradition texts shaped by family background, community participation, and prior schooling may have moderated the strength of schema activation for some participants. Schroeder et al. (2022) observe that within any indigenous community, individual differences in cultural experience can produce variable cognitive responses to the same culturally grounded instructional materials. This suggests that, tentatively, greater diversity in the oral tradition texts employed, drawing on a broader range of narrative genres and thematic orientations, might expand the reach and consistency of the cultural scaffolding effect a hypothesis that would need to be tested in future studies with a comparative design.

The questionnaire findings present a compelling picture of the affective dimensions of students' experiences with culturally responsive ELT. The 89.86% aggregate positive response rate is striking in its own right, and the item-level data provide a richer interpretive layer. The near-unanimous endorsement on Item 4 (learning motivation, 96.5% positive) is consistent with Anyichie and Butler's (2023) and Ladson-Billings' (2021) theoretical propositions regarding the motivational dividend of cultural alignment between instructional content and learner identity. Gotlieb et al.'s (2022) account that culturally and emotionally resonant content engages interdependent social, emotional, and cognitive neural systems and lowers affective barriers to engagement offers a plausible framework for interpreting this result, though the present study did not measure neurological or physiological indicators and so cannot substantiate this account directly. For students in a remote setting with limited daily English exposure, motivational enhancement of this kind carries particular strategic importance if it holds, since motivation is itself a well-established predictor of long-term language learning outcomes (Dewaele & Meftah, 2024; Kristiawan et al., 2022).

The skew toward Strongly Agree on Item 5 (vocabulary retention, 56.7%) indicates that students hold a strong conviction rather than merely a hedged opinion about the mnemonic benefits of culturally anchored instruction. This finding converges with Zeng et al.'s (2025) theoretical account of depth of processing, which would predict that When new

vocabulary is processed within a culturally familiar narrative context, the associative pathways through which it is encoded are multiplied, strengthening the memory trace and enhancing recall. The repetitive structures and rhythmically coherent form of Dayak Punan narratives May have functioned as natural mnemonic scaffolds, a pattern consistent with findings from comparable research on indigenous storytelling in other language learning contexts (Schroeder et al., 2022). However, as students' perceptions rather than direct retention measures were collected, this interpretation remains suggestive rather than confirmed.

The comparatively higher rates of negative responding on Items 1 and 3 merit specific attention. The 16.7% negative response rate on Item 1 (cultural vocabulary association) likely reflects individual variation in familiarity with the specific oral tradition texts used in instruction. Anyichie and Butler (2023) caution that treating cultural identity as a homogeneous variable is a fundamental error of implementation: within any community, the distribution of cultural experience is uneven, and instructional materials that activate strong schemata for most students may generate weaker associations for those whose prior cultural exposure differs from the majority. The 13.3% negative response rate on Item 3 (classroom engagement) may similarly reflect heterogeneity in individual interactional preferences relative to the participatory structures embedded in oral tradition-based activities. Future iterations of the instructional design could address both of these concerns through greater variety in the cultural texts employed and a broader range of participation modes including individual, paired, and collective formats. Taken together, the vocabulary test and questionnaire findings converge on a set of implications for ELT curriculum design in remote and culturally distinct educational settings. Most directly, they lend support to the integration of indigenous oral traditions as contextually authentic instructional resources for English vocabulary teaching, with the observed vocabulary outcomes and strongly positive learner perceptions in this context together suggesting that such an approach merits further, more rigorous investigation particularly given the limited cultural relevance of commercially produced materials in this setting.

The findings further highlight the importance of curricular variety in the selection of cultural materials. The achievement gap and the relatively elevated negative responses on Items 1 and 3 both signal the limitations of a single-text or single-tradition approach, and point toward the need for a curriculum that draws on a broader range of Dayak Punan narrative forms, genres, and performance styles to activate cultural schemata across the full spectrum of individual learners. The strength of the motivation and retention findings carries particular significance for long-term language development planning in remote Indonesian schools. Students who experience cultural affirmation in the English language classroom whose heritage is reflected and valued rather than marginalised may be more likely to sustain engagement with English study over time and to develop the intrinsic motivation that supports autonomous language learning. Instructional materials designed

to potential cultural resonance effect may therefore yield returns not only in immediate vocabulary gains but in the broader and more enduring arc of students' language development trajectories possibility-future research employing pretest-posttest or comparison-group designs would be well placed to examine.

CONCLUSION

This study examined vocabulary acquisition outcomes and learner perceptions of fourth-grade students at SDN 005 Mentarang following culturally responsive ELT instruction grounded in Dayak Punan oral traditions. Findings support a positive assessment of this approach, though with notable differentiation. Vocabulary test results showed that 63.33% of students achieved Good or Excellent proficiency ratings, with a class mean of 74.67, and 66.67% of participants meeting the KKM threshold; the remaining 33.33% did not attain the minimum standard, indicating a continued need for differentiated instructional support. The questionnaire yielded an overall positive response rate of 89.86%, with learning motivation (96.5%) emerging as the most strongly endorsed dimension of the instructional experience. These results align with schema theory, culturally responsive teaching, and vocabulary acquisition research, suggesting that cultural grounding in Dayak Punan oral traditions supported both the depth of lexical processing and the affective conditions conducive to learning, although the descriptive, non-experimental design precludes firm causal claims. Limitations include the small single-school sample, which constrains generalisability, and the absence of qualitative data from interviews or classroom observation. Nonetheless, these findings offer meaningful evidence for culturally responsive ELT in indigenous community settings, carrying practical implications for teachers, curriculum designers, and policymakers seeking to bridge the cultural distance between school language and students lived experience in remote Kalimantan schools.

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