

MULTIMODAL STORYTELLING OF CENTRAL JAVANESE FOLKTALES FOR ENGLISH LEARNING IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

Integrating local culture into language learning creates meaningful and enjoyable experiences for young learners. This study investigates how Central Javanese folktales—such as *Timun Mas*, *Roro Jonggrang*, *Bawang Merah & Bawang Putih*, and *Keong Emas*—can support English reading and listening skills in primary schools while embedding moral values such as honesty, perseverance, and kindness. The research employed a classroom-based mixed-method design involving 60 fourth-grade students from two primary schools in Surakarta. The instructional intervention was implemented over eight weeks using multimodal storytelling materials that combined illustrated storybooks, audio narration, and interactive classroom activities. Data were collected through classroom observations, student performance assessments, and teacher interviews. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse students' reading and listening performance, while thematic analysis was applied to interpret observational and interview data. Findings indicate that multimodal folktale-based instruction improves vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, and listening accuracy, while also encouraging active speaking through retelling, dramatization, and story discussion. Students additionally demonstrated higher motivation and enjoyment, connecting English learning with culturally familiar narratives and moral reflection. These results highlight the potential of culturally grounded multimodal storytelling as an engaging pedagogical approach for primary English education that integrates linguistic development, moral education, and student-centred learning.

Keywords: Central Javanese folktales, multimodal learning, moral values, primary school English, reading and listening



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INTRODUCTION

Teaching English in primary schools in Indonesia often faces persistent challenges related to students' low motivation, limited exposure to authentic language input, and the need for culturally meaningful learning contexts (Widodo, Wood, & Gupta, 2023). Several studies have reported that English instruction at the primary level is constrained by factors such as insufficient instructional time, limited learning resources, and a shortage of qualified English teachers, which in turn affects students' engagement and comprehension in the classroom (Nugroho, Sulistyowati, & Kurniati, 2025; Yusrina, Setyaningsih, & Putra, 2025). In many schools, students encounter English only during short classroom sessions and have minimal opportunities to practice the language in authentic communicative situations. These conditions frequently lead to difficulties in vocabulary acquisition, listening comprehension, and sustained learning motivation. Recent research on English learning motivation among Indonesian young learners also emphasizes that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors significantly influence students' engagement and participation in English learning activities (Nurhayati, Kuswandono, & Ena, 2024). Furthermore, studies on young EFL learners in Indonesia highlight the importance of understanding students' motivation and task engagement as key factors influencing successful language learning in primary education (Philp & Duchesne, 2025).

Research also indicates that integrating local cultural content into language instruction can significantly enhance engagement and contextual understanding among young learners (Akbar, 2018; Choo, 2011). When learning materials reflect students' cultural

background and prior knowledge, learners are more likely to connect new linguistic forms with familiar meanings. In this regard, folktales represent rich cultural artifacts that are simple, memorable, and morally instructive, making them particularly suitable for language learning in early education. Through culturally familiar narratives, students can engage with English learning in ways that are both meaningful and enjoyable.

In the present study, Central Javanese folktales were specifically selected due to their cultural proximity to the learners participating in this research, who are primary school students in Surakarta and surrounding areas. These stories are widely known within the local community and are frequently transmitted through family storytelling, school activities, and regional cultural traditions. Such familiarity allows students to access the narrative content with reduced cognitive load while focusing more effectively on language learning tasks (Akbar, 2018; Choo, 2011). In addition, Central Javanese folktales are rich in moral and social values that align with character education goals emphasized in Indonesian primary education (Agung et al., 2025). The integration of locally grounded narratives therefore not only supports language development but also reinforces culturally relevant moral understanding among young learners.

Previous studies on folktale-based English instruction have explored grammar teaching (Purnomo & Widarwati, 2025), vocabulary acquisition (Angeli et al., 2010), and reading comprehension (Ball et al., 1990). However, recent research indicates that many folktale-based EFL practices still rely on conventional storytelling or text-based activities, with limited integration of multimodal elements such as visual, audio,



and interactive learning tasks that can simultaneously support multiple language skills (Chen, 2023; Hidayat et al., 2024). Moreover, although studies have acknowledged the cultural value of folktales in language education, the explicit integration of moral or character values within multimodal English instruction for young learners remains insufficiently examined, particularly in local Indonesian contexts (Agung et al., 2025). Consequently, there is still a need for empirical research that investigates how culturally grounded folktales combined with multimodal learning strategies can simultaneously enhance language development and moral awareness among primary school learners. The findings of the present study indicate that the use of multimodal folktale-based learning contributed to improvements in students' reading and listening comprehension, while also encouraging greater participation in speaking activities and reflection on the moral values embedded in the stories.

In recent years, the teaching of English to young learners has increasingly emphasized meaningful communication rather than isolated language drills. Young learners require contextualized and engaging learning experiences that connect language with their daily lives and cultural backgrounds. Without meaningful context, English learning may be perceived as abstract and difficult, leading to decreased motivation and participation. Therefore, integrating culturally familiar narratives into classroom instruction can serve as an effective strategy to bridge linguistic input with students lived experiences, enabling them to relate new vocabulary and expressions to familiar concepts and social values (Akbar, 2018).

Storytelling has long been recognized as a powerful pedagogical tool

in primary education (Choo, 2011; Hafner & Miller, 2021; Bland, 2018; Li & Seedhouse, 2023). Through storytelling, learners are exposed to authentic language structures, narrative sequencing, and expressive communication in an enjoyable format (Hafner & Miller, 2021). Folktales, in particular, offer repetitive structures, predictable plots, and memorable characters that facilitate comprehension and retention, which supports narrative literacy development among young learners (Rose & Martin, 2022; Bland, 2018). When students engage with stories they already know in their first language or cultural context, cognitive load is reduced, allowing them to focus more effectively on language acquisition and interpretation. This process enhances both linguistic competence and narrative understanding, making storytelling a valuable resource for early English instruction (Choo, 2011). Despite these benefits, relatively few studies have examined the integration of local folktales within multimodal English instruction, particularly in Indonesian elementary education. Most existing studies focus on general storytelling practices or digital narratives, leaving the use of culturally grounded folktales combined with multimodal learning strategies in Indonesian primary classrooms comparatively underexplored.

In addition to narrative-based learning, multimodal instructional approaches have gained prominence in contemporary language education (Kalantzis, Cope, & Pinheiro, 2023). Multimodal learning combines visual, auditory, and kinesthetics elements to support diverse learning styles and improve comprehension. According to multimedia learning theory, students process information more effectively when it is presented through multiple channels, such



as images, sounds, and interactive activities (Mayer, 2009; Kalantzis et al., 2023). For young learners, whose attention spans are relatively short, multimodal materials help sustain engagement and facilitate deeper understanding of language input. Visual illustrations support vocabulary recognition, audio narration enhances listening skills, and interactive tasks encourage active participation.

The integration of multimodal storytelling in English classrooms also supports the development of speaking skills and collaborative learning. When students participate in retelling stories, role-playing characters, or discussing moral lessons, they practice using language in meaningful social contexts. Such activities promote confidence, creativity, and communicative competence. Moreover, group storytelling and dramatization foster cooperative learning environments where students learn from peers and negotiate meaning together. These interactive processes contribute to both linguistic development and social-emotional learning, which are essential components of primary education.

Equally important is the role of moral education embedded in traditional folktales. Central Javanese folktales often convey values such as honesty, perseverance, kindness, respect, and responsibility. Integrating these stories into English instruction enables teachers to combine language learning with character education. Students not only develop language skills but also reflect on ethical behaviours and cultural norms represented in the narratives. Such integration supports holistic education by addressing cognitive, linguistic, and affective domains simultaneously. Despite this potential, the systematic incorporation of moral values within multimodal English instruction remains underexplored, particularly in local

Indonesian contexts, thereby highlighting the relevance and necessity of the present study.

This research addresses these gaps by investigating how multimodal folktale-based materials can support reading and listening comprehension while promoting moral awareness in young learners. The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do multimodal folktale materials impact students' English reading and listening performance?
2. How do moral values in the stories influence students' understanding and behaviour?
3. What is the role of speaking activities in reinforcing comprehension and engagement?

The significance of this study lies in its potential to offer innovative, culturally responsive, and enjoyable instructional strategies for primary English education that bridge linguistic, cognitive, and ethical development.

METHOD

This study employed a classroom-based mixed-methods research design, combining qualitative classroom observations with quantitative indicators of students' learning outcomes (Creswell, 2014; Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen, & Walker, 2018). The approach was primarily descriptive in nature, aiming to explore how multimodal storytelling of Central Javanese folktales influenced students' engagement and English learning performance in a natural classroom setting. Participants were 60 grade-4 students from two primary schools in Surakarta. The instructional materials included multimodal folktale packages, consisting of illustrated storybooks, audio recordings of the tales, and structured classroom activities such as



retelling, dramatization, and comprehension exercises (Mayer, 2009; Choo, 2011). Data collection involved:

1. Observations of student engagement and classroom interaction (Patton, 2015).
2. Assessments of reading comprehension and listening accuracy through short-answer questions and multiple-choice tests (Angeli et al., 2010).
3. Teacher interviews to obtain professional insights into students' responses, participation, and moral learning outcomes (Akbar, 2018). The teacher interviews involved four English teachers who participated in the instructional implementation in the two schools. Semi-structured interview questions focused on several themes, including students' engagement with multimodal storytelling activities, perceived improvements in reading and listening comprehension, students' participation in speaking tasks, and the extent to which moral values embedded in the folktales were understood by the learners. Each interview lasted approximately 20–30 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic coding procedures for qualitative observations and interview data, following the stages of data reduction, code identification, theme categorization, and interpretation (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2019). Quantitative performance measures were analysed using descriptive statistics to identify trends in students' reading and listening outcomes. Ethical considerations included obtaining parental consent and ensuring voluntary participation (Creswell, 2014).

The instructional procedures were implemented over eight weeks of classroom

sessions integrated into regular English lessons. Each folktale was introduced through a sequence of multimodal activities beginning with pre-listening and pre-reading tasks to activate students' prior knowledge and predict story content. This was followed by guided listening to audio narration accompanied by illustrated texts, enabling students to associate spoken language with visual cues and contextual meaning. Post-activity sessions included vocabulary reinforcement, comprehension questions, group retelling, and short dramatization tasks designed to promote speaking confidence and collaborative learning. This structured sequence ensured that each learning mode—visual, auditory, and interactive—was systematically integrated into the teaching process.

To ensure reliability and validity of the findings, triangulation was applied across multiple data sources, including classroom observations, student performance assessments, and teacher interviews. Observational data were recorded using structured field notes and engagement checklists, while test results were compiled and compared across different folktales to identify patterns in comprehension and participation. Teacher interview responses were transcribed and analysed to support interpretation of classroom dynamics and moral learning outcomes. This combination of qualitative and quantitative data strengthened the credibility of the study by providing a comprehensive understanding of how multimodal folktale-based instruction influenced students' linguistic development and classroom engagement.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that Central Javanese folktales effectively support



multimodal English learning in primary classrooms.

1. Reading comprehension

Students showed improved understanding of storylines, character traits, and key vocabulary. Folktales' familiar cultural contexts made it easier for students to predict events, infer meaning, and understand descriptive language. This aligns with Choo (2011), who found that culturally relevant narratives enhance comprehension and retention.

Further classroom observations revealed that students became increasingly confident in identifying main ideas and supporting details within the folktales. They demonstrated improved ability to sequence events, recognize cause-effect relationships, and interpret descriptive passages related to setting and character actions. Teachers also reported that students were more willing to read aloud and participate in guided reading activities when the stories reflected familiar cultural themes. The integration of visual illustrations and contextual vocabulary lists enabled learners to connect new English words with existing cultural knowledge, resulting in deeper comprehension and longer retention of story content.

2. Listening skills

Audio narration reinforced students' ability to process spoken English and recognize intonation, pronunciation, and context-specific vocabulary. Paired listening activities with visual illustrations facilitated understanding of abstract or unfamiliar concepts, consistent with multimodal learning theory (Angeli et al., 2010).

Students' listening development was particularly evident during repeated exposure to audio storytelling sessions.

Initially, many learners relied heavily on visual support; however, over time they demonstrated increased ability to comprehend spoken instructions, narrative sequences, and character dialogues without extensive visual cues. Listening tasks such as identifying key words, answering comprehension questions, and matching sounds with images helped students focus on pronunciation patterns and rhythm in spoken English. The combination of audio and visual input created a supportive environment that reduced anxiety and enabled learners to process spoken language more effectively, ultimately strengthening both comprehension and confidence.

3. Speaking and interaction

Retelling, dramatization, and story discussions promoted oral expression and reinforced both comprehension and moral reasoning. For example, students discussed how Bawang Putih's perseverance and honesty resulted in positive outcomes, linking story content to personal behaviour.

In addition to structured speaking tasks, spontaneous classroom interactions also increased during the implementation of folktale-based activities. Students actively asked questions about characters, predicted story endings, and expressed personal opinions about moral dilemmas presented in the narratives. Group dramatization and role-play encouraged collaborative communication, allowing learners to practice simple dialogues, descriptive expressions, and emotional vocabulary in meaningful contexts. Teachers noted that even quieter students gradually became more engaged in oral activities, indicating that familiar cultural narratives and enjoyable storytelling formats helped reduce speaking anxiety and promote communicative confidence.



4. Moral values

Integrating ethical lessons in stories enhanced students' reflection and engagement. Observation showed students often referenced kindness, honesty, and bravery in their oral summaries, indicating internalization of values alongside language acquisition.

The integration of moral values within the folktales provided meaningful opportunities for reflective learning and character development. Classroom discussions frequently extended beyond language practice to include conversations about honesty, responsibility, perseverance, and respect for others. Students were encouraged to relate story events to their daily experiences, fostering deeper personal connections with the narratives. Teachers observed that this reflective process not only enhanced engagement but also promoted positive classroom behaviour and empathy among students. As a result, language learning was perceived not merely as an academic task but as a holistic educational experience that combined linguistic competence with ethical awareness.

These qualitative and quantitative observations were further supported by measurable performance data. Students' reading, listening, and speaking performances were assessed using structured classroom-based instruments designed for young EFL learners. Reading comprehension was measured through short-answer and multiple-choice questions focusing on identifying main ideas, sequencing story events, and recognizing key vocabulary from the folktales. Listening comprehension was evaluated through audio-based tasks in which students responded to comprehension questions, identified key information, and matched spoken phrases with visual illustrations.

Speaking performance was assessed through storytelling retelling and short dramatization activities using a simple rubric evaluating fluency, pronunciation clarity, vocabulary use, and participation. Each component was scored on a four-level performance scale ranging from emerging to proficient, following common classroom assessment practices for young language learners (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2019). To enhance reliability, scoring was conducted using consistent assessment criteria across the four folktale sessions, and observational notes from teachers were used to triangulate students' performance data (Creswell, 2014; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2019).

Table 1 presents a summary of students' reading accuracy, listening accuracy, and speaking engagement across the four selected Central Javanese folktales. The table illustrates that multimodal instruction not only improved comprehension and listening skills but also encouraged active participation in oral activities, reflecting the integrated development of linguistic and moral competencies.

Table 1. Example of Student Comprehension Scores Across Stories

Story Title	Reading Accuracy (%)	Listening Accuracy (%)	Speaking Engagement (%)
Timun Mas	88	82	75
Roro Jonggrang	85	79	70
Bawang Merah & Bawang Putih	90	84	78
Keong Emas	87	81	73



Compared with previous studies on storytelling in language education, the present findings highlight the added value of multimodal integration in culturally grounded narratives. Earlier research has shown that storytelling can improve comprehension and vocabulary learning among young learners (Choo, 2011; Angeli et al., 2010). However, many of these studies focused on single-mode instruction, such as text-based reading or audio storytelling. The results of the present study suggest that combining visual illustrations, audio narration, and interactive storytelling activities can produce broader engagement and more integrated language development. This multimodal approach also provides opportunities for collaborative learning and moral reflection, which are less frequently addressed in conventional storytelling practices.

These results indicate that multimodal folktale instruction supports the simultaneous development of reading, listening, and speaking skills while fostering moral awareness among young learners. This finding extends previous studies that typically examined storytelling primarily for reading comprehension or vocabulary development (Angeli et al., 2010; Choo, 2011). By integrating visual, auditory, and interactive elements, the present study demonstrates how multimodal storytelling can support broader language engagement compared to single-mode instructional approaches. Differences with prior studies are notable: while traditional reading-only or audio-only approaches improve isolated skills, the combined visual-audio-interactive approach produces broader engagement and skill development.

Classroom observations also indicated increased student motivation and participation during storytelling,

illustration-based activities, and dramatization. This finding suggests that culturally grounded storytelling can create a supportive learning environment that encourages active engagement among young language learners.

Another important finding concerns the role of familiarity in enhancing comprehension. Because the folktales used in this study—such as *Timun Mas* and *Bawang Merah & Bawang Putih*—were already known to many students in their first language, learners could focus more on understanding English vocabulary and expressions rather than struggling with unfamiliar storylines. This familiarity facilitated schema activation, enabling students to predict narrative developments and interpret meanings more efficiently. Compared to foreign or unfamiliar stories, local folktales allowed students to make stronger connections between prior knowledge and new linguistic input, resulting in deeper comprehension and retention.

The integration of multimodal elements also contributed significantly to differentiated learning. Students with stronger visual learning preferences benefited from illustrated storybooks and visual sequencing activities, while auditory learners responded positively to audio narration and listening exercises. Kinesthetics' learners, on the other hand, demonstrated greater engagement during dramatization and role-play sessions. This multimodal approach ensured that students with diverse learning styles could access and process language input effectively. As a result, classroom interaction became more inclusive and dynamic, supporting the needs of learners with varying levels of proficiency and confidence.

Furthermore, teacher interview data indicated that folktale-based instruction



supported not only linguistic development but also classroom management and social interaction. Teachers reported that students became more cooperative during group storytelling and dramatization activities. Collaborative tasks encouraged peer support, turn-taking, and respectful communication. These social behaviours contributed to a positive classroom climate that facilitated learning. Teachers also noted that students were more willing to express ideas and opinions when discussing familiar stories, suggesting that culturally relevant content can lower affective barriers and promote communicative competence.

Finally, the integration of moral values within folktale-based English instruction provided a meaningful bridge between language learning and character education. Students frequently related story events to their own experiences, discussing themes such as honesty, kindness, and perseverance. These reflective discussions extended beyond language practice, enabling students to internalize ethical lessons and apply them to daily life. Compared to conventional language lessons that focus primarily on linguistic accuracy, the multimodal folktale approach fostered holistic learning by simultaneously developing language proficiency, cultural awareness, and moral understanding. This integrative outcome underscores the pedagogical value of combining local cultural narratives with multimodal strategies in primary English education.

These findings can also be interpreted through several theoretical perspectives in language learning. From the perspective of multimedia learning theory, the integration of visual illustrations, audio narration, and interactive storytelling activities provides multiple channels for information processing, enabling young learners to construct meaning more

effectively through combined visual and auditory input (Mayer, 2009). This multimodal presentation helps reduce cognitive overload and supports deeper comprehension, particularly for learners who are still developing their literacy skills.

In addition, the results resonate with sociocultural learning theory, which emphasizes that language development occurs through social interaction and collaborative meaning-making (Vygotsky, 1978). Activities such as group storytelling, dramatization, and classroom discussions created opportunities for students to negotiate meaning, practice new vocabulary, and construct knowledge together in a supportive learning environment.

Furthermore, the use of culturally familiar folktales reflects principles of culturally responsive pedagogy and context-sensitive language instruction for young learners (Widodo et al., 2023). By engaging with stories such as *Timun Mas* and *Bawang Merah & Bawang Putih*, students were able to relate new English expressions to familiar narratives and moral values, thereby strengthening both linguistic comprehension and cultural identity. This alignment between cultural relevance and multimodal instruction helps explain the increased engagement, motivation, and participation observed during the learning activities.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that multimodal storytelling using Central Javanese folktales provides an effective and culturally meaningful approach to English learning in primary schools. By integrating visual illustrations, audio narration, and interactive storytelling activities, the approach supports the development of multiple language skills simultaneously,



including reading comprehension, listening accuracy, and speaking confidence. At the same time, the use of culturally familiar narratives enables students to engage with moral values such as honesty, kindness, perseverance, and empathy, thereby connecting language learning with character education.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings contribute to the growing body of research on multimodal learning, sociocultural language development, and culturally responsive pedagogy. The study shows how multimodal storytelling can function as a pedagogical bridge between linguistic development and cultural meaning-making in young learners' language education. By combining multimodal instructional design with culturally familiar folktales, the study highlights how language learning can be enhanced when cognitive, social, and cultural dimensions of learning are addressed simultaneously.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings offer several practical implications for English language education in primary schools. For teachers, storytelling-based lessons can be designed using multimodal resources such as illustrated storybooks, audio narration, group retelling activities, and dramatization tasks to encourage active participation and integrated language practice. For curriculum designers, incorporating local folktales into English learning materials can provide culturally meaningful content that supports both language development and character education. Integrating such narratives into thematic units or literacy-based activities may help contextualize language learning within students' sociocultural backgrounds. At the policy level, educational policymakers may consider promoting culturally responsive language learning

approaches by encouraging the inclusion of local narratives and multimodal learning strategies within national or regional English curricula for young learners. Such initiatives could support the alignment between language education, cultural preservation, and character-building objectives emphasized in Indonesian primary education.

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study was conducted within a relatively limited timeframe and involved a small sample of participants from two primary schools in Surakarta. Consequently, the findings may not fully represent the diversity of educational contexts across Indonesia. Future research could extend this work by involving larger participant groups, implementing longitudinal or experimental designs, and exploring the use of digital storytelling or technology-enhanced multimodal platforms. Such investigations would further clarify how culturally grounded multimodal instruction can sustainably support English learning and character development among young learners.

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