

TENGGKO SITURU'-BASED CONTEXTUAL LEARNING TO ENHANCE ENGLISH VOCABULARY MASTERY AND CHARACTER VALUES AMONG ELEMENTARY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to improve young learners' English vocabulary mastery and promote character values through the integration of Tengko Situru' local wisdom in contextual English learning. The study was conducted in the fourth grade of UPT SDN 2 Mengkendek using Classroom Action Research implemented in two cycles, consisting of planning, action, observation, and reflection. The participants were 15 elementary school students. Data were collected through vocabulary tests, classroom observation, interviews, and documentation. The data were analyzed using descriptive qualitative and quantitative methods by referring to individual and classical learning achievement indicators. The findings showed that integrating Tengko Situru' values into English vocabulary learning improved students' vocabulary mastery and classroom participation. In the preliminary stage, the students' average score was 65, with a classical achievement of 40%. In Cycle I, the average score increased to 74.4, with a classical achievement of 73.3%. Furthermore, in Cycle II, the average score improved to 85, with a classical achievement of 86.7%. Besides the improvement in vocabulary learning outcomes, positive changes were also observed in students' character values, including cooperation, responsibility, care, and mutual respect. These values reflect the principles of Tengko Situru' as local wisdom of the Toraja community. Therefore, contextual English learning based on Tengko Situru' local wisdom can be considered an effective strategy to support young learners' language development while strengthening character education.

Keywords: english vocabulary learning, local wisdom, contextual learning, young learners, character values

INTRODUCTION

English language education for young learners has become an important concern in elementary school contexts, especially in countries where English is taught as a foreign language. At this level, English learning is not only intended to introduce students to a new language but also to build early communicative competence, confidence, and positive attitudes toward language learning. Young learners need learning experiences that are meaningful, enjoyable, and closely related to their daily lives because their cognitive, social, and emotional development is still strongly influenced by concrete experiences and familiar contexts. However, teaching English to young learners is not a simple process. Teachers often face challenges related to students' limited vocabulary, low motivation, classroom management, and the need to use age-appropriate learning strategies (Copland et al., 2014; Butler, 2015; Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2011).

Among the components of English language learning, vocabulary plays a fundamental role. Vocabulary mastery becomes the basis for developing listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Students who have limited vocabulary may find it difficult to understand classroom instructions, identify objects, respond to simple questions, or express ideas in English. Vocabulary is also closely related to literacy development because students need sufficient word knowledge to understand texts and participate in classroom interaction. Therefore, vocabulary instruction should not be treated as a simple memorization activity but as a meaningful process that helps learners understand word forms, meanings, pronunciation, and use in context (Schmitt, 2008; Webb, 2008; Zeng et al., 2025). In many elementary EFL classrooms, vocabulary learning is still often conducted through translation, repetition, and memorization of word lists. Although these techniques may help students recognize words, they do not always support long-term retention or active use of vocabulary in communication. Vocabulary learning becomes more effective when students are given opportunities to encounter words repeatedly, process meanings deeply, and use words in meaningful contexts. Incidental and intentional vocabulary learning both require engagement, repetition, and contextual support. When learners meet new words through stories, pictures, dialogues, role plays, classroom objects, and real-life situations, they are more likely to connect new vocabulary with prior knowledge and daily experience (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001; Webb, 2007; Ohle-Peters et al., 2025).

Contextual learning is therefore relevant for English vocabulary instruction at the elementary level. Through contextual learning, students are encouraged to learn English by connecting vocabulary items with their environment, social life, cultural practices, and classroom activities. Context-based vocabulary activities can help learners understand how words are used in real situations rather than learning them as isolated language items. Recent studies also show that context-based vocabulary activities, especially when supported by appropriate media and interactive tasks, can improve students' vocabulary knowledge and learning motivation (Sural & Sağlık, 2024). In the classroom, this approach can be implemented through pictures, songs, games, animated videos, storytelling, group tasks, and simple dialogues that reflect students' everyday experiences.

Besides contextualization, culturally responsive learning is also important in English language education. English should not be taught as a language that separates learners from their cultural identity. Instead, English learning can become a space where students use a new language to understand, express, and appreciate their own local values. Culturally responsive and culturally sustaining pedagogy emphasize that students' cultural backgrounds should be recognized as learning resources. When students' local culture is included in the learning process, they may feel that the materials are closer to their lives, more meaningful, and more motivating. This perspective supports the idea that language learning can develop both communicative competence and cultural identity (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012).

The integration of local culture into English language teaching has also received increasing attention in Southeast Asian and Indonesian EFL contexts. Local culture-based English learning can make materials more familiar and relevant for students while

supporting their engagement and cultural awareness. Studies on local culture integration in ELT show that cultural content can improve learners' attitudes, participation, and understanding of learning materials. In the Indonesian context, English learning materials based on local content have been developed to support vocabulary mastery, pronunciation, and student engagement. Culture-based English learning materials are also considered useful because they allow students to learn English while maintaining their cultural identity and understanding their local environment (Ratri et al., 2024; Mariani & Basuki, 2023; Syafii et al., 2022). One form of local wisdom that can be integrated into English vocabulary learning is *Tengko Situru'*. *Tengko Situru'* is a local value of the Toraja community that reflects togetherness, cooperation, mutual respect, sensitivity, responsibility, and solidarity. These values are relevant to elementary education because young learners need to develop not only language competence but also positive character values. Integrating *Tengko Situru'* into English vocabulary learning allows students to learn words such as help, share, friend, respect, care, responsible, together, and cooperate through meaningful classroom activities. These vocabulary items can be connected with real actions in students' social lives, making English learning more concrete and character-oriented. Local wisdom-based learning also supports character education because cultural values can strengthen students' awareness of positive behavior in school and community life (Kabanga et al., 2023; Sakti et al., 2024; Berkowitz & Bier, 2004).

Based on preliminary classroom observation in the fourth grade of UPT SDN 2 Mengkendek, students' English vocabulary mastery still needed improvement. Some students had difficulty recognizing basic English words, pronouncing vocabulary correctly, and using words in simple classroom contexts. Their participation was also limited when learning activities relied mainly on teacher explanation and word memorization. In addition, English learning had not fully integrated students' local culture and daily social experiences. This condition indicates the need for a learning strategy that is contextual, culturally relevant, and suitable for young learners.

Therefore, this study focuses on integrating *Tengko Situru'* local wisdom in English vocabulary learning to promote young learners' language development and character values. The study is expected to provide a meaningful English learning experience by connecting vocabulary materials with students' local wisdom, classroom interaction, and everyday life. Through contextual activities based on *Tengko Situru'* values, students are expected to improve their English vocabulary mastery while developing cooperation, responsibility, care, and mutual respect. Thus, this research contributes to English language education by offering a local wisdom-based contextual learning strategy for elementary school students.

METHOD → (TNR, 12pt)

1. Research Design

This study employed Classroom Action Research (CAR) with a descriptive qualitative approach supported by quantitative data. CAR was selected because the study aimed to solve a practical classroom problem, namely students' limited English vocabulary mastery and low participation in English learning. This design allowed the

researcher to improve the learning process through repeated cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection. The study was conducted in two cycles. Each cycle focused on implementing contextual English vocabulary learning based on Tengko Situru' local wisdom. The values integrated into the learning activities included cooperation, care, responsibility, mutual respect, and togetherness. This design was appropriate because it enabled the researcher to examine both students' vocabulary improvement and the development of positive character values during the learning process.

2. Participants / Subjects

The participants of this study were 15 fourth-grade students of UPT SDN 2 Mengkendek. The students were selected through purposive sampling because preliminary observation showed that they had difficulties in recognizing, pronouncing, and using basic English vocabulary. The research was conducted in the fourth-grade classroom during the current semester. The class teacher was involved as a collaborator to help observe the learning process, students' participation, and classroom interaction. Since the participants were young learners, the learning activities were designed to be simple, visual, contextual, and related to students' daily experiences.

3. Instruments

The instruments used in this study were vocabulary tests, observation sheets, interview guidelines, and documentation. The vocabulary tests were used to measure students' English vocabulary mastery before and after the implementation of the action in each cycle. The vocabulary items were related to daily life, school activities, social interaction, and Tengko Situru' values, such as help, share, friend, care, respect, together, responsible, and cooperate. Observation sheets were used to record students' participation, responses, cooperation, responsibility, care, and mutual respect during classroom activities. Interview guidelines were used to obtain information from the teacher and students about their responses to the learning process. Documentation included lesson plans, teaching materials, students' worksheets, photographs, field notes, and test results. The instruments were reviewed based on the learning objectives, students' level, and relevance to the values of Tengko Situru'.

4. Data Collection Procedure

The data collection was carried out in several stages. First, the researcher conducted preliminary observation to identify students' initial problems in English vocabulary learning. A preliminary vocabulary test was also administered to determine students' initial achievement. Second, the researcher prepared the lesson plans, vocabulary materials, animated video media, observation sheets, tests, and interview guidelines. Third, the action was implemented in Cycle I by teaching English vocabulary through contextual activities based on Tengko Situru' local wisdom. Students learned vocabulary through pictures, animated videos, pronunciation practice, group work, and simple classroom expressions. Fourth, the researcher and collaborator observed the learning process and recorded students' participation and character values. After Cycle I, a vocabulary test was given. The results were reflected

upon to improve the next cycle. In Cycle II, the learning activities were strengthened through more contextual examples, role play, and collaborative vocabulary practice. At the end of Cycle II, another vocabulary test was administered. Permission from the school was obtained, and students' identities were kept confidential.

5. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using qualitative and quantitative descriptive analysis. Qualitative data from observation, interviews, field notes, and documentation were analyzed by organizing, categorizing, and interpreting students' responses and classroom behavior. Quantitative data from vocabulary tests were analyzed by calculating the average score and percentage of classical achievement. The success of the study was indicated by improvement in students' English vocabulary mastery and positive changes in participation and character values after the implementation of Tengko Situru'-based contextual learning.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

This classroom action research was conducted in two cycles through the implementation of contextual English vocabulary learning based on Tengko Situru' local wisdom. The learning process was supported by animated video media, picture-based vocabulary activities, pronunciation practice, group work, and simple classroom expressions. The main purpose of the action was to improve fourth-grade students' English vocabulary mastery and to promote positive character values, such as cooperation, responsibility, care, mutual respect, and togetherness.

The students' English vocabulary achievement was analyzed descriptively by referring to the minimum learning mastery criterion. Students were considered to have achieved individual mastery if they obtained a score of ≥ 70 , while classical mastery was achieved if at least 80% of the students reached the minimum score. The vocabulary tests were conducted in three stages: pre-cycle, Cycle I, and Cycle II. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Students' English Vocabulary Learning Outcomes

Stage	Average Score	Students Achieving Mastery	Percentage of Mastery	Category
Pre-Cycle	65	6 of 15 students	40%	Poor
Cycle I	74.4	11 of 15 students	73.3%	Sufficient
Cycle II	85	13 of 15 students	86.7%	Good

In the pre-cycle stage, the students' average vocabulary score was 65, which was categorized as poor. Only 6 out of 15 students, or 40%, achieved the minimum mastery criterion, while 9 students, or 60%, had not achieved mastery. This result indicated that the students' English vocabulary mastery was still low. Based on classroom observation, several students had difficulty recognizing basic English words, pronouncing vocabulary correctly, and using words in simple classroom contexts. The learning process was also less connected to students' daily life and local cultural background, making vocabulary learning less meaningful for young learners.

In Cycle I, contextual English vocabulary learning was implemented by integrating Tengko Situru' values into the learning materials and classroom activities. The vocabulary items introduced in this cycle were related to daily interaction and character values, such as help, share, friend, care, respect, together, responsible, and cooperate. Animated video media were used to help students understand the meaning of vocabulary through visual and contextual examples. Students were also involved in pronunciation practice, question-and-answer activities, and simple group tasks.

The results of Cycle I showed improvement. The average score increased from 65 to 74.4, and the number of students who achieved mastery increased from 6 students to 11 students. The percentage of mastery also increased from 40% to 73.3%. Although the improvement was significant, classical mastery had not yet been achieved because the percentage of students who reached the minimum score was still below 80%. Reflection on Cycle I showed that some students still needed more guidance in using vocabulary in simple expressions. Some students were able to recognize the meaning of English words but were not yet confident in pronouncing and applying them in classroom interaction.

Based on the reflection, improvements were made in Cycle II. The learning activities were strengthened through more contextual examples, repeated vocabulary practice, role play, collaborative tasks, and the optimization of animated video media. Students were given more opportunities to use vocabulary in meaningful situations, such as greeting friends, helping classmates, sharing learning tools, and working together in groups. These activities were designed to connect English vocabulary learning with the values of Tengko Situru', especially cooperation, care, responsibility, and mutual respect.

The results of Cycle II showed a more significant improvement. The students' average score increased to 85, which was categorized as good. Thirteen out of 15 students, or 86.7%, achieved the minimum mastery criterion. This result indicated that classical mastery was achieved because more than 80% of the students reached the expected score. The improvement from the pre-cycle to Cycle II showed that contextual English vocabulary learning based on Tengko Situru' local wisdom was effective in improving students' vocabulary mastery.

Besides the improvement in vocabulary achievement, positive changes were also observed in students' classroom behavior. The students became more active in participating in vocabulary activities, more confident in pronouncing English words, and more willing to work with their classmates. The integration of Tengko Situru' values encouraged students to show cooperation, responsibility, care, and mutual respect during the learning process.

Table 2. Development of Students' Character Values during English Vocabulary Learning

Character Value	Classroom Indicators Observed
Cooperation	Students worked together in group vocabulary tasks and helped each other understand word meanings.
Responsibility	Students completed vocabulary exercises and participated in classroom activities seriously.

Care	Students helped friends who had difficulty pronouncing or remembering vocabulary.
Mutual Respect	Students listened to their friends' answers and appreciated different levels of ability.
Togetherness	Students became more engaged in group learning and classroom interaction.

The findings show that English vocabulary learning became more meaningful when it was connected to students' local wisdom and real-life experiences. Through Tengko Situru'-based contextual learning, students did not only memorize English words but also understood how the words were related to positive social behavior. For example, vocabulary such as help, share, respect, and cooperate was practiced through classroom activities that reflected students' daily interactions. This helped students build a connection between language learning and character formation. These findings are in line with the concept of contextual learning, which emphasizes that students learn better when materials are connected to real-life situations. Learning English vocabulary through familiar cultural values helped students understand word meanings more easily and remember them longer. The use of animated video media also supported young learners' comprehension because visual materials made vocabulary more concrete and interesting.

Furthermore, the integration of Tengko Situru' local wisdom contributed to character education in English learning. The values of cooperation, responsibility, care, and mutual respect became part of the learning process, not only as moral messages but also as vocabulary content and classroom practice. This indicates that English language learning can be used as a medium to develop both language competence and character values. Overall, the improvement in students' average scores, the increase in classical mastery, and the positive changes in classroom behavior demonstrate that contextual learning based on Tengko Situru' local wisdom is effective in promoting young learners' English vocabulary development and character values. Therefore, this strategy can be recommended as an alternative approach for English vocabulary learning in elementary schools, especially in local contexts where cultural values can be used as meaningful learning resources. Data ini disesuaikan dari pola hasil penelitian tindakan kelas pada naskah awal.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the integration of Tengko Situru' local wisdom into contextual English vocabulary learning improved young learners' vocabulary mastery and supported the development of positive character values. The increase in students' average scores from the pre-cycle to Cycle II shows that vocabulary learning became more effective when English words were introduced through meaningful contexts, visual media, and classroom activities related to students' daily lives. This finding supports the view that vocabulary learning should not only focus on memorizing isolated words but also on understanding word meanings, forms, and use in context (Schmitt, 2008).

The improvement in students' vocabulary mastery also suggests that repeated exposure to vocabulary through pictures, animated videos, pronunciation practice, and

group activities helped students retain and use new words more confidently. Vocabulary acquisition requires repeated encounters with words in different contexts so that learners can develop stronger word knowledge and long-term retention (Webb, 2007). In this study, students were repeatedly exposed to words such as *help, share, respect, care, together,* and *cooperate* through contextual learning activities. This process made vocabulary learning more concrete and meaningful for young learners. The use of contextual learning also contributed to students' active involvement in the classroom. Students were not only asked to recognize vocabulary but also to practice it through interaction, role play, and collaborative tasks. Such activities are relevant to task-induced vocabulary learning, in which learners acquire vocabulary more effectively when they are cognitively and socially engaged in meaningful tasks (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001). Through classroom interaction, students had opportunities to connect English vocabulary with real actions and social behavior. Furthermore, the integration of Tengko Situru' values strengthened the cultural relevance of English learning. Students learned English vocabulary through local values that were familiar to them, such as cooperation, responsibility, care, and mutual respect. This finding is in line with culturally responsive teaching, which emphasizes the importance of using students' cultural backgrounds as resources for learning (Gay, 2002). By connecting English learning with local wisdom, students were able to see English not as a distant foreign language but as a tool to express values from their own community.

The findings also support the concept of culturally relevant pedagogy, which argues that learning should develop academic competence while maintaining students' cultural identity (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In this study, Tengko Situru' values became a bridge between language development and character education. Students did not only learn vocabulary meanings but also practiced positive social values during classroom activities. This is consistent with culturally sustaining pedagogy, which encourages schools to sustain students' cultural practices while supporting academic learning (Paris, 2012). In the context of teaching English to young learners, meaningful and enjoyable activities are essential because children learn best through visual, interactive, and socially engaging experiences (Copland et al., 2014). The use of animated video media helped students understand vocabulary more easily because abstract meanings were presented through visual and contextual examples. This supports the idea that young learners need age-appropriate strategies that match their cognitive and emotional development (Butler, 2015).

The results also show that technology-supported contextual vocabulary activities can improve learning motivation and vocabulary knowledge when they are appropriately integrated into classroom instruction (Sural & Sağlık, 2024). In addition, the use of Tengko Situru' values reflects the importance of Torajan local wisdom in educational contexts, particularly in strengthening social relationships and community-based learning values (Kabanga et al., 2023). Therefore, this study confirms that contextual English vocabulary learning based on Tengko Situru' local wisdom can promote both young learners' language development and character values.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the classroom action research, it can be concluded that the integration of Tengko Situru' local wisdom into contextual English vocabulary learning was effective in improving young learners' vocabulary mastery and promoting positive character values. The implementation of learning activities supported by animated video media, pronunciation practice, group work, role play, and simple classroom expressions helped students understand and use English vocabulary in more meaningful contexts. The improvement of students' vocabulary mastery was shown by the increase in their learning outcomes from the pre-cycle to Cycle II. In the pre-cycle stage, the students' average score was 65 with a classical mastery of 40%. After the implementation of Tengko Situru'-based contextual learning in Cycle I, the average score increased to 74.4 with a classical mastery of 73.3%. In Cycle II, the average score increased to 85 with a classical mastery of 86.7%, indicating that the success indicator had been achieved. In addition to improving students' English vocabulary mastery, the learning process also encouraged the development of character values. Students showed better cooperation, responsibility, care, mutual respect, and togetherness during classroom activities. These character values reflected the principles of Tengko Situru' as local wisdom of the Toraja community. Therefore, integrating Tengko Situru' local wisdom into English vocabulary learning can be considered an effective and meaningful strategy for young learners. This approach not only supports students' language development but also strengthens character education through culturally relevant learning. Thus, Tengko Situru'-based contextual learning is recommended as an alternative approach for English language teaching in elementary schools, especially in local cultural contexts.

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