

## **Integrating Culture and Language Learning: Effects of Islamic Life Resource Pack (ILRP) on EFL Reading Comprehension in an Indonesian Islamic Junior High School**

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### **Abstract**

*Reading comprehension is a challenge for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in Indonesian Islamic junior high schools. English texts can seem unrelated to students' lives and values. The researchers evaluated the culturally responsive instructional resource, the Islamic Life Resource Pack (ILRP), to determine if students' reading comprehension improved following the ILRP. The researchers conducted a pre-experimental, one-group pretest-posttest study of 26 eighth-grade students in an Islamic junior high school. The researchers conducted a pretest to assess reading comprehension, followed by ILRP-based instruction, and then did a posttest. The descriptive statistics and paired-samples t-test were used to analyze the findings. The researchers found a significant increase in reading comprehension after the intervention ( $M$  gain = 19.31,  $SD$  = 6.19;  $t(25)$  = 15.89,  $p$  < .001; 95% CI [16.81, 21.81]). This means that ILRP-based, culturally responsive reading instruction may help students to develop reading in Indonesian Islamic junior high schools. The findings should be taken with caution because they were conducted in a single intact group and sample size ( $n$  = 26), which may not allow us to draw strong causal conclusions due to possible threats to internal validity (e.g., testing effects and maturation). Despite these limitations, the study provides preliminary evidence to inform future larger-scale, controlled research on culturally responsive EFL reading instruction in Indonesian Islamic school settings.*

*Keywords: Culturally relevant pedagogy, EFL reading comprehension, English language instruction, Islamic junior high schools, Islamic Life Resource Pack (ILRP)*

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## 1. Introduction

Reading comprehension is an important component of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction in Indonesia and plays an important role in students' academic development, especially in places where English is not the primary language used. In Indonesia, English is taught as a foreign language and is an essential subject in junior high school. Despite this, there is data that shows Indonesian EFL students are low-achieving in reading comprehension abilities, including recognizing main ideas, finding references, and interpreting rhetoric (Dardjito et al., 2023; Wulandari et al., 2021). This raises questions about the effectiveness of reading instruction in Indonesian classrooms, especially in Islamic secondary schools.

Many language, psychological, and pedagogical reasons could explain this situation. Indonesian EFL learners are at the low-end of the language learning spectrum; they lack adequate vocabulary and decoding skills, and they rely on word-for-word translations to not understand much in the world (Dardjito et al., 2023). Emotional issues such as reading anxiety, low confidence, and low intrinsic motivation further reduce the engagement of Indonesian EFL students with English (Wijayati et al., 2021; Winnie et al., 2023). Teachers are often heavily dependent on textbook-based teaching and struggle to choose reading materials that are meaningful and accessible to students in Islamic schools (Nurkamto et al., 2021). Problems became even worse during the COVID-19 pandemic, when teachers began to recognize gaps in the students' readiness for online learning and digital literacy (Mabrur & Suwartono, 2021).

Recent research has indicated that student engagement is a significant link between instructional practice and reading comprehension outcomes. Engagement, as measured by the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects of engagement, has been shown to predict reading comprehension in EFL (Derakhshan et al., 2022; Ghelichli et al., 2023; Shehzad et al., 2023). Active learning, flipped classrooms, and explicit instruction in reading strategies have been shown to improve reading comprehension (Majdi et al., 2025; Reflianto et al., 2021), but such measures may not have any impact when the instructional materials do not reflect the learners' cultural and religious identities. This suggests that pedagogical innovation alone may be insufficient without consideration of the cultural relevance of instructional material.

Culture-responsive pedagogy has therefore gained greater interest as a means of improving EFL reading instruction. Studies have shown that incorporating learners' cultural background into instructional materials increases motivation, engagement, and comprehension by activating prior knowledge and fostering a sense of belonging (Cho & Christ, 2021; Capper, 2021; Lau & Shea, 2022). In Islamic schools, where religious values are strong, including Islamic content within English learning materials would be especially beneficial to students. Studies have shown that the inclusion of Islamic values in the classroom can positively impact students' discipline, motivation, and morality (Hidayah et al., 2021; Tsani et al., 2024; Wulan et al., 2021). Despite these positive findings, studies on how culturally and religiously informed material impacts EFL reading comprehension remain unclear.

A recent addition to the English Language Training for Islamic Schools (ELTIS) program is the Islamic Life Resource Pack (ILRP). The ILRP provides an opportunity to integrate English language learning with Islamic values through activities and texts that use a culturally appropriate approach. ILRP has been found to encourage student participation, vocabulary development, and integration into the context of an Islamic school setting (Machfudi, 2017; Nurchalis et al., 2019; Utami, 2018). Prior studies are largely descriptive or qualitative and have focused primarily on the alignment of curriculum or teacher perceptions, as opposed to measuring actual student learning outcomes.

This research adds to the literature on the effectiveness of culturally appropriate instruction in EFL for Islam (EFL) classrooms with a focus on the impact of the Islamic Life Resource Pack (ILRP) on students' reading comprehension. While several prior research reports have focused on the relationship between the curriculum and the teacher's perception of ILRP (Machfudi, 2017; Utami, 2018; Nurchalis et al., 2019), relatively few have reported quantitative data about the impact of ILRP in EFL reading instruction at junior high schools. In a pre-experimental one-group pretest-posttest design, a study evaluates the student learning gains after the introduction of ILRP instruction at an Islamic secondary school. This study adds classroom-based evidence to the growing body of research on culturally responsive teaching in EFL reading in EFL, especially in underrepresented religions.

Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. Does the implementation of the Islamic Life Resource Pack (ILRP) significantly improve EFL students' reading comprehension at the junior high school level?
2. To what extent does ILRP-based instruction contribute to students' reading comprehension gains in an Islamic educational context?

## 2. Literature Review

Reading comprehension in EFL classrooms has been demonstrated to be influenced by linguistic knowledge, strategies, and effects. The researchers have previously observed that vocabulary, working memory, and complexity of tasks may contribute to the readers' ability to comprehend texts (Brooks et al., 2021; Brunfaut et al., 2021). Strategies such as scaffolding, graphic organizers, and instruction about text structures have been shown to improve both literal and inferential comprehension in EFL learners (Li et al., 2022; Peng et al., 2023; Habók et al., 2024). However, such strategies can be of limited effectiveness when the instructional materials are culturally disconnected from the learners' lives.

Participation has been identified as one of the primary variables in understanding readers' comprehension successes. Research suggests that those students who are engaged in thought and feelings are more likely to use good reading strategies and persist in challenging reading tasks (Derakhshan et al., 2022; Shehzad et al., 2023). Classroom atmosphere and enjoyment of the foreign language may influence students' willingness to engage in reading (Hosseini et al., 2022). Despite its importance, learning is still underexplored in many studies on reading intervention, particularly in secondary EFL (Anderson et al., 2021).

Culture-responsive instruction addresses both comprehension and engagement. Teaching with culturally responsive content promotes student schema activation and a decrease in cognitive barriers to understanding (Cho & Christ, 2021; Capper, 2021). In a variety of educational settings, researchers have shown that texts that are culturally appropriate improve inference-making skills, motivation, and the learners' sense of belonging (Bijani et al., 2022; Lau & Shea, 2022). Cultural identity has also been associated with motivation and perceived skill in language learning (Peng & Patterson, 2021).

In Islamic schools, teaching materials using Islamic values serve both pedagogical and moral purposes. Studies have proven that instructional materials based on Islamic values improve students' character, behaviour, and motivation as well as academic performance (Hidayah et al., 2021; Tsani et al., 2024; Taja et al., 2021). With regards to English language teaching, Islamic values help to bridge the cultural gap between English and students' religious backgrounds, making learning more meaningful and contextually appropriate (Djamdjuri et al., 2021).

Schema theory, task-based language teaching, and cognitive load theory are two other examples of theories that support the inclusion of culturally-based supplementary materials in the

classroom. Schema theory discusses the importance of background knowledge to comprehending, while task-based language teaching emphasizes the need for meaningful reading tasks (Jing et al., 2023). Cognitive theories emphasize the need for multiple modes and context-rich materials to aid retention and understanding (Vu et al., 2021). The ILRP is a sound instructional resource that integrates language, culture, and values.

Although ILRP seems to be suited for the Islamic school environment and to encourage students to engage with the material (Machfudi, 2017; Utami, 2018; Nurchalis et al., 2019), there is limited evidence to support direct effects on EFL reading comprehension. This study positions ILRP in the literature on culturally responsive teaching practices and EFL reading instruction, and adds empirical data to strengthen the literature on instructional products that incorporate cultural and religious learning practices.

### 3. Research Methods

The research methods used in this study were based on the basis of quantitative research approach under the pre-experimental design in nature. It started from the research design, participants, and the materials, instruments, data collection, and analysis, explained successively.

#### 3.1 Research Design

This study used a one-group pretest–posttest (within-subject) design to determine whether the inclusion of culturally and religiously relevant content with the Islamic Life Resource Pack (ILRP) improved students' EFL reading comprehension in an Indonesian Islamic junior high school. The design was selected because the ILRP was part of classroom instruction in one intact class, and the school did not allow us to set up a comparable control class having no ILRP instruction during the same time period. The intervention study was thus a classroom intervention test examining changes in student learning over time.

While the lack of a control group minimizes the strength of strong causal claims (e.g., relating gains solely to ILRP), a within-subject study is appropriate for answering the research questions of this study because each student serves as their own baseline, allowing for a direct measurement of change from pretest to posttest in an authentic classroom setting. Although pre-experimental designs do not allow strong causal claims, they are widely used in classroom-based language education research to capture instructional effects in real educational contexts, as seen in Figure 1 below.



Figure 1: Pre-test post-test design

#### 3.2 Participants and the Instructional Material

The study was conducted at MTs Walisongo 1 Maron, an Islamic junior high school in East Java, Indonesia, during the 2022-2023 school year. The sample included 26 eighth-grade students (Class VIII-A) randomly selected via purposive sampling. This sampling strategy was chosen to ensure accessibility and consistency of the teacher's teaching method because the researcher was directly involved with the classroom teaching. The subjects represented a diverse set of English levels typical of Indonesian Islamic secondary schools. The ethics considerations were also addressed. The school administrators granted permission for the study, and students were informed about the purpose of this study. Participation was voluntary and anonymized.

Islamic Life Resource Pack (ILRP) was used in the study. ILRP links English language learning to Islamic values through culture-based themes, short readings, vocabulary lists, and comprehension tasks. In this study, ILRP focused on narratives on topics such as My Role in the Family, Helping Others, and Being Honest as the themes reflected both the national English curriculum and the sociocultural background of junior high school students in Islamic countries.

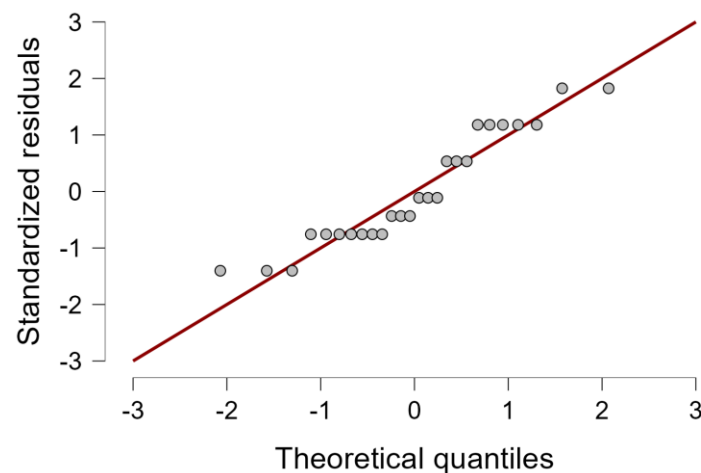
### 3.3 Instruments

Reading comprehension of the students was assessed by a 25-item multiple choice test (Assessment Resource Pack) of the English Language Training for Islamic Schools (ELTIS). It assessed key reading comprehension skills such as identifying main ideas, details, understanding references, and recognizing vocabulary in context. A total of two senior English teachers and one ELTIS consultant rated the content validity of the test against the Indonesian junior high school English curriculum. Prior to use, the test was piloted with similar students and had a reliability coefficient (Pearson  $r$ ) of 0.789, indicating high reliability.

### 3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

In order to collect data on the reading comprehension gains of the students, data were collected in the pre-testing, treatment, and post-testing stages. First, a pretest was administered to measure the baseline reading comprehension of the students. The test was administered in the regular classroom within 45 minutes. The treatment phase took two weeks and included five instruction sessions (approximately 80 minutes per lesson). Reading activities using ILRP strategies such as guided reading, think-pair-share, small group discussion, and reading aloud were utilized to increase comprehension and engagement during this treatment. A posttest was administered following the treatment phase, in the same format and difficulty as the pretest, to measure student progress in reading comprehension.

The collected data were analyzed using JASP version 0.96.0.0. Descriptive statistics were calculated to summarize students' pretest and posttest scores. Before hypothesis testing, data normality was examined using the QQ plot residual (see Figure 2). Since the data were normally distributed, a paired-samples t-test was employed to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference between students' pretest and posttest scores. Statistical significance was determined at the 0.05 level.



**Figure 2:** Pre-test, post-test QQ plot residual

To address Research Question 1, pretest and posttest scores were compared using a paired-samples t-test (within-subject), which evaluates whether the mean change within the same students is statistically different from zero. In addition to statistical significance, the analysis reported a 95% confidence interval (CI) for the mean difference and a standardized effect size for paired designs (Cohen’s d), to quantify the magnitude of learning gains. To address Research Question 2 (“to what extent”), the study interpreted the size of the gain using the mean difference, CI bounds, and effect size magnitude, describing how substantial the improvement was in practical terms for this Islamic educational context.

#### 4. Results

This section presents the findings of the study in relation to the research questions. The results are organized to clearly demonstrate whether and to what extent the implementation of the Islamic Life Resource Pack (ILRP) improved students’ EFL reading comprehension.

**RQ1:** Does the implementation of the Islamic Life Resource Pack (ILRP) significantly improve EFL students’ reading comprehension at the junior high school level?

To answer the first research question, students’ reading comprehension scores before and after the ILRP-based instruction were compared using a paired-samples t-test. Descriptive statistics of the pretest and posttest scores are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Descriptive Statistics of Pre-test and Post-test Scores

	N	Mean	SD	SE	Coefficient of variation
Pre-test	26	58.85	9.78	1.92	0.17
Post-test	26	78.15	9.21	1.81	0.12

As shown in Table 1, students’ mean reading comprehension score increased from 58.85 in the pretest to 78.15 in the posttest, indicating a substantial improvement following the ILRP-based instruction. Before conducting the t-test, data normality was examined using the Shapiro-Wilk test. The results indicated that both pretest and posttest scores were normally distributed ( $p > .05$ ), allowing the use of parametric statistical analysis. The paired-samples t-test results are summarized in Tables 2 and 3.

**Table 2:** Paired-Samples t-Test with 95% Confidence Interval (CI) for Mean Difference

Measure 1	Measure 2	t	df	p	Mean Difference	SE Difference	95% CI for Mean Difference	
							Lower	Upper
Pre-test	- Post-test	-5.89	25	< .001	-19.31	1.22		-16.81

*Note.* Student’s t-test.

**Table 3:** Paired-Samples t-Test with 95% Confidence Interval (CI) for Cohen’s d

Measure 1	Measure 2	t	df	p	Cohen's d	SE Cohen's d	95% CI for Cohen's d	
							Lower	Upper
Pre-test	- Post-test	-15.89	25	< .001	-3.12	0.308	-4.051	-2.170

Note. Student's t-test.

Students’ mean reading comprehension score increased from  $M = 58.85$  ( $SD = 9.78$ ) on the pretest to  $M = 78.15$  ( $SD = 9.21$ ) on the posttest ( $N = 26$ ). A paired-samples t-test showed that this improvement was statistically significant,  $t(25) = -15.89$ ,  $p < .001$ . The mean difference (pretest minus posttest) was  $-19.31$  points, with a 95% CI  $[-21.81, -16.81]$ , indicating a robust improvement in scores following the ILRP-based instruction.

In terms of magnitude, the paired-sample effect size was very large (Cohen’s  $d = -3.12$ ; negative here reflects that posttest scores were higher than pretest scores). In practical terms, this suggests that students’ reading comprehension improved by roughly 19 points on average during the ILRP implementation period in this Islamic junior high school context.

**RQ2:** To what extent does ILRP-based instruction contribute to students’ reading comprehension gains in an Islamic educational context?

To answer the second research question, the researchers based the elaboration on Tables 2 and 3 as follows. ILRP was integral to the students’ reading comprehension gains at this Islamic school. Students’ performance on the posttest was significantly higher than on the pretest (mean gain = 19.31 points;  $SD = 6.19$ ). A paired-samples t test revealed that their performance improved significantly after the ILRP intervention. The improvement was statistically significant,  $t(25) = -15.89$ ,  $p .001$ ; students performed significantly better after the ILRP intervention. The magnitude of the improvement was also large (Cohen’s  $d 3.12$ ), indicating that the improvement was not only reliable but also educationally important to this group. In an Islamic school, the changes may reflect the culturally and religiously resonant texts, helping students engage with and understand by making background knowledge more easily accessible. But, as the study used a one-group pretest–posttest design with a relatively small sample size ( $n = 26$ ), the results are preliminary, and future studies need to be tested with larger comparison groups in order to make stronger claims.

### Summary of Findings

Implementation of the Islamic Life Resource Pack (ILRP) was associated with an improvement in the EFL reading comprehension of students attending a junior high school in an Islamic classroom. Between the pre-test and post-test, the mean student’s reading comprehension score was 58.85, and the average student’s reading comprehension score was 78.15, a gain of 19.30 points. The significance level of this increase was significant ( $t(25) = 15.89$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and the gain was very large (Cohen’s  $d 3.12$ ; 95% CI for gain  $[16.81, 21.81]$ ). The results suggest that instruction ILRP may assist in developing reading comprehension in a Muslim school context, but these should be taken as preliminary evidence and verified in larger controlled studies.

## 5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine if the Islamic Life Resource Pack (ILRP), as a culturally responsive instructional material, could improve the readers’ comprehension in EFL

students at an Indonesian Islamic junior high school. Students' reading scores increased from  $M = 58.85$  ( $SD = 9.78$ ) in the pretest to  $M = 78.15$  ( $SD = 9.21$ ) in the posttest, a mean increase of 19.31 points. In the paired sample t-test, the difference was significant at  $t(25) = -15.89$ ,  $p < .001$ , with a 95% confidence interval [16.81, 21.81] and a very large effect size (Cohen's  $d = -3.12$ ). The results indicate that students' understanding improved following the ILRP instruction, but the benefit does not necessarily stem from the intervention alone, as the pre-experiment is not attributed to the intervention, as the pre-experimental design suggests.

Comparing these data to similar reports from studies that have focused on strategies in reading instruction suggests that the effect magnitude is larger than those reported in studies of strategy-based instruction (Li et al., 2022; Peng et al., 2023; Habók et al., 2024). But, such comparisons should be cautiously drawn as differences in research designs, sample characteristics, intervention duration, and assessment instruments may partially account for the unusually large effect size of the intervention in this study. Cohen's  $d = -3.12$  may reflect not only the impact of ILRP but also factors such as contextual or methodological factors, such as testing effects or familiarity with test formats. The findings nonetheless tentatively support the idea that culturally responsive materials might help learners learn to read more effectively than just with strategy-based instruction.

From a theoretical perspective, these results are consistent with schema theory, which suggests that learners do not understand well unless they can activate relevant background knowledge. Based on the relative improvement of all participants' confidence interval [16.81–21.81], it may be because the ILRP content enabled learners to use familiar cultural and religious schemas. Studies have suggested that easily recognizable texts can be used to infer and comprehend meaning (Bijani et al., 2022; Lau & Shea, 2022). But this study did not directly assess schema activation or cognitive load in this study. Thus, schema theory is plausible but only inference instead of empirically verified.

A number of other studies have also indicated that student engagement is a predictor of reading comprehension (Derakhshan et al., 2022; Shehzad et al., 2023; Ghelichli et al., 2023). The significant increase in mean scores from 58.85 to 78.15 may reflect increased engagement during instruction using ILRP. As discussed above, engagement was not directly measured in this study. While it is reasonable to speculate that exposure to culturally relevant content increased the interest and participation of students, such statements should be considered cautiously. Compared to studies that are explicitly measuring engagement via behavioral or affective measures, the current study offers only indirect evidence of its role.

In terms of culturally responsive pedagogy, the results are generally in line with previous research, indicating that including learners' cultural backgrounds into instructional content can increase motivation and understanding (Cho & Christ, 2021; Capper, 2021). Nevertheless, I believe that this study contributes to the literature by providing quantitative evidence of learning gains in an educational context that has not previously been reported on. Although the earlier studies in this area often relied on qualitative or perception data (Machfudi, 2017; Utami, 2018; Nurchalis et al., 2019), the current findings may extend these previous studies, but they vary in their methodological rigor.

Likewise, the role of Islamic values in learning outcomes deserves to be explored in more detail. Previous research has documented that including religious values in instruction can increase students' motivation, discipline, and moral behavior (Hidayah et al., 2021; Tsani et al., 2024; Taja et al., 2021). This study tentatively extends those claims by suggesting that the use of these values may also help with the cognitive aspects of reading comprehension (mean gain of 19.31 points). But, because no time was found to isolate the role of religious content from other variables in the

classroom (e.g., teaching strategies, interaction), it is unclear whether the observed gains are specifically due to the Islamic value of ILRP.

Comparing this study to studies that examined technology-based language learning (Burston & Giannakou, 2021; Qazi et al., 2021), these results suggest that content relevance may be equally as or even more important than delivery mode. However, the researchers would not necessarily conclude that culturally relevant resources are more effective than digital or multimodal materials. The effectiveness of ILRP may lie in the relationship between cultural relevance, instruction, and classroom environments. Future research would be needed to explore this relationship more fully.

This may be a result of the collaborative learning activities integrated into the ILRP instruction. Since the standard deviations were relatively stable ( $SD = 9.78$  at pretest and  $SD = 9.21$  at posttest), gains may have been distributed across proficiency levels. This is consistent with the findings of other studies suggesting that collaborative reading practices enhance comprehension through shared meaning-making (Liu et al., 2021; Morell et al., 2022). But, as in other studies, this study design does not allow for separating the effect of collaboration from the effects of culturally responsive content.

Despite the promising findings, there are several limitations to be aware. One-group pretest-posttest design is generally not considered to be causal (Bierer et al., 2025; Schneider & Rohmann, 2021). So, the researchers cannot exclude the possibility that students may have matured or become familiar with the test, or that a teacher may have had an effect. In addition, there are only 26 participants in this study, which limits the generalizability of the findings. The effects may be too large ( $d = -3.12$ ), but they should be interpreted cautiously, as effect sizes could be overestimated in small-sampled educational studies.

In this light, the results of this study are preliminary but indicative. They suggest that ILRP could help support EFL reading comprehension in an Islamic school environment, but further research with more rigorous designs (such as quasi-experimental or randomised controlled trials) will be necessary to confirm these claims. Further studies should incorporate measures of mediating variables like engagement, motivation, and schema activation to gain a better understanding of how culturally responsive materials impact learning.

Overall, while the current study may add valuable classroom-based evidence to the literature on culturally responsive EFL instruction, it is primarily useful in opening up avenues for further investigation rather than concluding anything. While the incorporation of cultural and religious content into language learning materials appears promising, its effectiveness should be evaluated in light of methodological limitations, contextual variation, and the interplay of cognitive and affective factors involved in language learning.

## 6. Conclusion

This study investigated the use of the Islamic Life Resource Pack (ILRP) in improving reading comprehension of eighth graders in an Islamic junior high school. It used a one-group pretest-posttest design to assess the effect of ILRP in increasing reading comprehension among eighth graders in a high school with an Islamic heritage. The results indicated a statistically significant increase in reading comprehension scores after ILRP instruction. The results indicate that ILRP may act as a resource for teaching EFL reading to students who have a cultural or religious background.

These results are consistent with prior research that suggests culturally responsive materials can help comprehension by familiarizing learners with content and engaging them with it. In this study, the ILRP was an instructional material that focused on Islamic values, as well as supporting

cognitive aspects of reading (understanding the main ideas, supporting details, and terms), and suggested that culturally appropriate materials may have a value beyond their context or moral values.

Despite its positive findings, this study was limited by the pre-experimental design, small sample size, and lack of a control group, which limits its generalizability. Nonetheless, this study provides empirical evidence from an underrepresented learning context, responding to calls for classroom-based research in EFL. Future research should employ quasi-experimental or mixed methods designs, larger and more diverse samples, and further investigate variables such as student engagement and motivation to further explore the impact of ILRP in different educational contexts.

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