

Original Article

Utilizing Malay Ethnopedagogy Through Kolb's Experiential Learning Approach: A Study on Learning Descriptive Texts of Traditional Foods to Enhance Students Cultural Literacy

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Abstract:

This research examines the implementation of Malay ethnopedagogy through Kolb's Experiential Learning approach in teaching descriptive texts about traditional foods to enhance students' cultural literacy. In the context of globalization, cultural values are increasingly marginalized in formal education, particularly in Indonesian language learning. This study aims to explore how the integration of local wisdom, specifically Malay culinary traditions, can be effectively utilized as learning materials through experiential learning cycles. Using a qualitative descriptive method with case study design, this research was conducted on 32 eighth-grade students at a junior high school in Riau Province. Data were collected through observation, interviews, learning outcomes analysis, and documentation. The findings indicate that Kolb's Experiential Learning approach, which encompasses concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation stages, significantly improves students' ability to write descriptive texts while simultaneously strengthening their cultural identity and literacy. Students demonstrated increased engagement, deeper understanding of text structures, and greater appreciation for local cultural heritage. This research contributes to the discourse on culturally responsive pedagogy and offers practical implications for integrating ethnopedagogy in Indonesian language curriculum.

Keywords: Malay ethnopedagogy, Experiential Learning, Kolb's theory, descriptive text, cultural literacy, traditional foods

Introduction

The Indonesian language plays a crucial role not only as a medium of communication but also as a vehicle for preserving and transmitting cultural values across generations (Alwasilah, 2012). However, in contemporary educational practice, language learning often becomes decontextualized from the rich cultural heritage that shapes its use and meaning. This disconnection is particularly evident in the teaching of text types, where examples and materials frequently lack cultural relevance to students' lived experiences (Mahsun, 2014).

Ethnopedagogy, defined as educational practice grounded in local wisdom and cultural values, offers a promising approach to address this pedagogical gap (Alwasilah, 2012). In the Malay cultural context, food represents more than sustenance; it embodies philosophical values, social practices, and historical narratives that have been preserved for centuries (Syarifuddin, 2015). Traditional Malay foods such as rendang, gulai, and lemang carry within them stories of migration, adaptation, and cultural synthesis that reflect the broader Malay worldview.

Despite the pedagogical potential of integrating local culinary traditions into language education, systematic studies exploring this integration remain limited. Previous research has examined ethnopedagogy in various contexts (Wagiran, 2012; Sudaryanto, 2015), yet few have specifically investigated how Malay food culture can be leveraged to enhance both linguistic competence and cultural literacy simultaneously.

This study addresses this gap by employing Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984), which posits that learning is most effective when it engages learners through concrete experiences, followed by reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation. This cyclical approach aligns well with ethnopedagogical principles, as it allows students to directly engage with cultural artifacts—in this case, traditional foods—before abstracting linguistic and cultural knowledge from these experiences. The following table illustrates the alignment between Kolb's Experiential Learning stages and ethnopedagogical activities in the context of learning descriptive texts about traditional Malay foods:

Table 1. Integration of Kolb's Experiential Learning Stages with Malay Ethnopedagogical Activities

Kolb's Learning Stage	Ethnopedagogical Activity	Learning Outcome
Concrete Experience (CE)	Direct observation and tasting of Sensory engagement with traditional Malay foods; cultural artifacts; building interviewing community elders authentic experiential about food preparation.	foundation.
Reflective Observation (RO)	Group discussion about food thinking and cultural characteristics, cultural significance, awareness; recognition of and preparation processes.	Development of critical values embedded in culinary practices.
Abstract Conceptualization (AC)	Analyzing descriptive text structure; Mastery of text conventions; identifying linguistic features; comprehension of cultural-understanding cultural symbolism linguistic relationships.	

Kolb's Learning Stage	Ethnopedagogical Activity	Learning Outcome
Active Experimentation (AE)	Writing descriptive texts about traditional foods; creating digital presentations; sharing texts with peers and community.	Application of linguistic knowledge; strengthening cultural identity and literacy

This research is guided by three primary objectives: (1) to describe the implementation of Kolb's Experiential Learning approach in teaching descriptive texts about Malay traditional foods, (2) to analyze the impact of this approach on students' writing quality and cultural literacy, and (3) to identify challenges and opportunities in integrating ethnopedagogy into the Indonesian language curriculum.

The significance of this study extends beyond pedagogical innovation. As globalization intensifies, young Indonesians face increasing cultural homogenization pressures (Tilaar, 2015). By grounding language education in local cultural practices, this research contributes to efforts to preserve cultural heritage while equipping students with the linguistic competencies required in modern educational contexts. Furthermore, this study offers practical frameworks for teachers seeking to implement culturally responsive pedagogy in diverse Indonesian contexts.

Literature Review

Ethnopedagogy and Language Education

Ethnopedagogy refers to educational practices that integrate local wisdom, cultural values, and indigenous knowledge systems into formal learning processes (Alwasilah, 2012). This approach challenges the dominant paradigm of education that often privileges universal, standardized knowledge over contextual, culturally specific understanding. Wagiran (2012) argues that ethnopedagogy serves as a bridge between formal education and community cultural practices, making learning more meaningful and relevant to students' lives.

In the Indonesian context, ethnopedagogical approaches have been applied across various subjects, from science to social studies (Sudaryanto, 2015). However, language education presents unique opportunities for ethnopedagogical integration because language itself is a primary carrier of cultural meaning (Kramsch, 1998). Sardiman (2016) demonstrates that teaching Indonesian language through local cultural contexts significantly enhances students' motivation and comprehension.

Malay culture, with its rich oral traditions, philosophical wisdom, and material culture, provides abundant resources for ethnopedagogical practice (Syarifuddin, 2015). Food, as a cultural artifact, is particularly valuable because it engages multiple sensory modalities and connects to students' daily experiences while carrying deep cultural significance (Supratman, 2018).

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory

David Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984) conceptualizes learning as a cyclical process involving four stages: concrete experience (CE), reflective observation (RO), abstract conceptualization (AC), and active experimentation (AE). This model emphasizes that effective learning requires the integration of action and reflection, experience and conceptualization.

Kolb's theory has been widely applied in various educational contexts, from professional training to academic learning (Healey & Jenkins, 2000). In language education specifically, experiential learning approaches have been shown to enhance both linguistic competence and learner engagement (Kohonen, 1992). The theory's emphasis on personal experience as the foundation for knowledge construction aligns well with constructivist approaches to language teaching. Moon (2004) extends Kolb's framework by emphasizing the importance of reflection in transforming experience into learning. This reflective dimension is particularly relevant for cultural literacy development, as it encourages students to critically examine the values and meanings embedded in cultural practices.

Descriptive Text and Cultural Literacy

Descriptive text, as a genre, serves to create vivid representations of objects, places, or phenomena through detailed sensory and factual language (Knapp & Watkins, 2005). In the Indonesian language curriculum, descriptive writing is introduced in junior high school as part of genre-based literacy instruction (Kemendikbud, 2016). However, traditional approaches to teaching descriptive text often rely on generic, decontextualized examples that fail to connect with students' cultural experiences (Emilia, 2011). Culturally relevant descriptive writing, in contrast, allows students to develop linguistic skills while simultaneously exploring and expressing their cultural identity (Mahsun, 2014).

Cultural literacy, defined as the ability to understand and appreciate the symbols, values, and practices of one's culture (Hirsch, 1987), is increasingly recognized as essential in globalized contexts. Banks (2008) argues that culturally responsive education not only preserves heritage but also equips students with critical thinking skills to navigate diverse cultural contexts.

Traditional Malay Foods as Learning Materials

Malay culinary traditions reflect complex historical processes, including trade connections, religious influences, and ecological adaptations (Syarifuddin, 2015). Foods like rendang, for instance, emerged from the need to preserve meat in tropical climates while incorporating spices from trade networks, demonstrating ingenuity and cultural synthesis (Ibrahim, 2017). Traditional food names often contain poetic and symbolic meanings. The term "lemang", for example, derives from the cooking method using bamboo, connecting the food to forest resources and traditional knowledge of material properties (Hassan, 2016). Such linguistic-cultural connections provide rich content for descriptive text instruction.

Moreover, food preparation processes embody values such as patience (in slow cooking rendang), community cooperation (in communal cooking for ceremonies), and respect for nature (in sustainable ingredient sourcing) (Supratman, 2018). These embedded values make traditional foods ideal vehicles for cultural literacy education.

Methods

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach with a case study design, aimed at providing an in-depth understanding of how Kolb's Experiential Learning approach can be implemented in teaching descriptive texts about Malay traditional foods. The qualitative approach was chosen to capture the complexity of learning

processes, student experiences, and cultural meaning-making that quantitative methods might overlook (Creswell, 2014).

Research Setting and Participants

The research was conducted at SMPN 3 Pekanbaru, Riau Province, Indonesia, over a period of six weeks during the academic year 2023/2024. The school was selected purposively due to its location in a region with strong Malay cultural presence and its willingness to implement innovative pedagogical approaches. Participants consisted of 32 eighth-grade students (16 males, 16 females) aged 13-14 years. The class represented diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, with approximately 60% of students having parents engaged in traditional occupations (farming, small trade) and 40% in modern sector employment. All students identified as ethnically Malay and spoke both Indonesian and Malay dialect at home.

Data Collection

Data were collected through multiple methods to ensure triangulation and validity:

1. Classroom Observation

Structured observations were conducted during all learning sessions, focusing on student engagement, interaction patterns, and learning behaviors. Observations were recorded using field notes and video recordings (with parental consent).

2. Document Analysis

Student-produced descriptive texts were collected at multiple stages of the learning cycle. These texts were analyzed for linguistic features, structural coherence, and cultural content.

3. Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 purposively selected students representing different ability levels and with the classroom teacher. Interview questions explored students' perceptions of the learning experience, cultural awareness, and writing development.

4. Cultural Literacy Assessment

A pre- and post-intervention assessment was administered to measure students' knowledge of traditional Malay foods, their cultural significance, and philosophical values.

Learning Intervention

The learning intervention was designed based on Kolb's four-stage experiential learning cycle.

1. Stage 1: Concrete Experience (Weeks 1-2)

Students participated in visits to a traditional Malay food festival and a local market. During these activities, they observed, tasted, and documented various traditional foods. In addition, students conducted interviews with community elders to gain insights into traditional food preparation methods and the cultural meanings embedded in these culinary practices.

2. Stage 2: Reflective Observation (Week 2-3)

Through facilitated group discussions, students reflected on their experiences, sharing observations about sensory characteristics, preparation processes, and cultural stories associated with the foods.

3. Stage 3: Abstract Conceptualization (Week 3-4)

The teacher introduced descriptive text structure, linguistic features (adjectives, sensory verbs, figurative language), and analyzed model texts about traditional foods. Students learned to identify patterns and conventions.

4. Stage 4: Active Experimentation (Week 5-6)

Students wrote their own descriptive texts about chosen traditional foods, received peer feedback, revised their work, and presented their texts to the class and community members.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. The process involved: (1) familiarization with data through repeated reading, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Student texts were analyzed using a rubric assessing: (1) content accuracy and cultural depth, (2) text structure and organization, (3) language use (vocabulary richness, grammar, descriptive techniques), and (4) creativity and voice. Cultural literacy was evaluated through content analysis of pre- and post-intervention assessments.

Finding and Discussion

Implementation of Kolb's Experiential Learning Approach

The implementation of Kolb's Experiential Learning cycle in teaching descriptive texts about Malay traditional foods revealed several significant patterns. During the Concrete Experience stage, students demonstrated high levels of engagement and enthusiasm. Field observations showed that 94% of students actively participated in the market visit and food festival, taking photographs, asking questions, and sampling foods. This contrasted sharply with typical classroom sessions, where average engagement rates hovered around 65%. The sensory-rich experiences provided students with abundant material for descriptive writing. One student noted in an interview: *"I never really paid attention to how lemang tastes before. When we focused on describing it, I noticed the smoky flavor from bamboo, the sticky texture, and how it changes when you add rendang sauce."* This heightened sensory awareness translated directly into richer descriptive vocabulary in subsequent writing tasks.

During Reflective Observation, students engaged in meaningful cultural dialogue. Group discussions revealed varying levels of prior cultural knowledge, with some students deeply familiar with traditional foods due to family practices, while others had limited exposure despite their Malay heritage. This diversity enriched discussions, as knowledgeable students shared cultural narratives they had learned from grandparents. A particularly poignant moment occurred when one student shared that her grandmother makes "*dodol*" (sticky sweet treat) only during Ramadan and explained the philosophical meaning behind its labor-intensive preparation as teaching patience and gratitude. This sparked broader discussion about how food preparation embodies values, moving beyond mere description to cultural interpretation. The Abstract Conceptualization stage successfully connected experiential knowledge to linguistic structures. Students demonstrated clear understanding of how descriptive texts are organized (identification and description sections) and the linguistic features that make descriptions vivid. Analysis of their notes showed they could identify specific adjectives, comparative language, and sensory verbs in model texts.

However, some students initially struggled to transfer their rich experiential knowledge into structured written form. The teacher addressed this through scaffolded exercises, including graphic organizers that helped students map sensory experiences to appropriate linguistic expressions. In the Active Experimentation stage, student-produced texts showed remarkable improvement in both linguistic quality and cultural depth. The average word count increased from 150 words in initial drafts to 380 words in final versions, reflecting expanded vocabulary and elaboration skills. More significantly, 87% of final texts included cultural contextual information beyond mere physical description.

Impact on Writing Quality

Analysis of student texts revealed substantial improvements across multiple dimensions. In terms of content, initial descriptive attempts tended to be generic and superficial. For example, an early draft about rendang stated: "*Rendang is a traditional food. It is delicious and spicy. Many people like it.*" The final version by the same student demonstrated transformation: "*Rendang, the crown jewel of Malay cuisine, emerges from a slow, meditative cooking process that can span eight hours. The meat gradually surrenders to the embrace of coconut milk and seventeen aromatic spices, transforming into tender morsels draped in a mahogany-colored sauce that carries the warmth of ginger, the earthiness of galangal, and the fierce embrace of bird's eye chilies.*" This improvement reflected not merely expanded vocabulary but deeper engagement with the subject matter. Students moved from external observation to empathetic connection with cultural artifacts. The descriptive language became more precise, employing specific rather than generic descriptors.

Structural organization also improved significantly. While 65% of initial drafts lacked clear organization, final texts showed 91% adherence to descriptive text structure with distinct identification and elaborated description sections. Students learned to use transitional language to guide readers through sensory dimensions (appearance, aroma, taste, texture) systematically. Language use analysis revealed increased sophistication in several areas. The average number of distinct adjectives per text increased from 8 to 23. Students employed figurative language more frequently, with similes and metaphors appearing in 78% of final texts compared to 23% in initial drafts. For instance, one student described "bubur pedas" (spicy porridge) as having "consistency like silk that has been kissed by morning dew, yet with a warmth that awakens the soul."

Enhancement of Cultural Literacy

Pre-intervention cultural literacy assessment revealed concerning gaps in students' knowledge of their own heritage. Only 34% could correctly identify the cultural significance of more than five traditional Malay foods beyond "they are traditional." Post-intervention assessment showed dramatic improvement, with 89% demonstrating deep understanding of cultural contexts, preparation philosophies, and symbolic meanings. Students articulated sophisticated cultural insights in interviews. One student explained: "*I used to think traditional food was just old-fashioned cooking. Now I understand that each dish tells a story about our ancestors' wisdom—how they used spices that were also medicine, how they created preservation methods before refrigeration, how they built community through shared cooking.*"

This cultural awakening extended beyond factual knowledge to identity formation. Several students reported feeling increased pride in Malay heritage. One

noted: *"When I explained to my friends from other cultures about why rendang takes so long to cook and what it symbolizes about patience and quality, I felt proud. I realized our culture has deep meaning".* The experiential learning approach facilitated intergenerational knowledge transfer. Multiple students reported having conversations with grandparents about traditional foods, with some documenting family recipes and stories that were at risk of being lost. This created a positive feedback loop where academic learning stimulated family cultural engagement.

Challenges and Adaptations

Implementation was not without challenges. Initial resistance came from students accustomed to traditional teaching methods who found the experiential approach unfamiliar and initially unstructured. Some students expressed preference for direct instruction, saying, *"Just tell us what to write."* The teacher addressed this through explicit explanation of the learning rationale and gradual scaffolding. Time constraints posed another challenge. The experiential learning cycle required significantly more time than conventional teaching approaches. Field trips, group discussions, and iterative writing processes consumed approximately 18 class hours compared to the typical 6-8 hours for teaching descriptive texts. School administrators needed convincing that this investment yielded proportionate learning gains.

Access to authentic cultural experiences varied among students. While the organized field trip ensured baseline exposure, students from families actively practicing traditional culture had advantages in accessing depth of cultural knowledge. The teacher mitigated this through strategic grouping and encouraging students to share family knowledge as valuable expertise. Assessment posed conceptual challenges. Traditional rubrics focusing solely on linguistic features inadequately captured the cultural learning occurring. The research team developed integrated assessment criteria evaluating both linguistic competence and cultural literacy, though this required additional teacher training and calibration.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that integrating Malay ethnopedagogy through Kolb's Experiential Learning approach offers a powerful framework for teaching descriptive texts while simultaneously enhancing cultural literacy. The cyclical process of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation creates meaningful connections between linguistic learning and cultural engagement. Students not only developed superior descriptive writing skills—evidenced by increased vocabulary richness, structural coherence, and linguistic sophistication—but also cultivated deeper understanding and appreciation of their cultural heritage. The approach transformed traditional foods from mere subject matter into vehicles for exploring identity, values, and intergenerational knowledge transmission.

Several key implications emerge from this study. First, culturally responsive pedagogy is not merely an ideological preference but a pedagogically sound approach that enhances learning outcomes across multiple dimensions. Second, experiential learning methods, while resource-intensive, yield learning that is deeper, more durable, and more meaningful to students than conventional approaches. Third, language education serves crucial cultural preservation functions, particularly in contexts where globalization pressures threaten local knowledge systems.

For educational practice, this research suggests that curriculum developers

should systematically integrate local cultural content across language learning units. Teachers require professional development in ethnopedagogical approaches and experiential learning design. Schools need to create flexibility for extended learning activities that transcend classroom boundaries. Future research should explore the long-term impacts of ethnopedagogical approaches on cultural identity formation and examine how these methods can be adapted across Indonesia's diverse cultural contexts. Comparative studies investigating different cultural artifacts (beyond food) as learning materials would enrich the ethnopedagogical knowledge base. Additionally, research examining how students transfer cultural literacy skills across contexts would illuminate the broader cognitive benefits of culturally responsive education. In conclusion, this study affirms that education can and should honor the rich cultural heritage students bring to learning while equipping them with competencies for contemporary contexts. By grounding language education in meaningful cultural experiences, we prepare students not merely as competent language users but as culturally literate citizens capable of navigating and contributing to both local and global communities.

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