

IMPROVING SEVENTH GRADE STUDENTS' READING COMPREHENSION THROUGH NIAS LOCAL CULTURE BASED FLASHCARDS: A CLASSROOM ACTION RESEARCH

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Abstract

Reading comprehension is a fundamental skill for EFL learners, yet many students struggle to engage with English texts, particularly when instructional materials lack cultural relevance. Previous studies have emphasized the effectiveness of flashcards in vocabulary learning, but limited research has explored their use with culturally contextualized content to improve reading comprehension, especially within Indonesian contexts such as Nias. This study aimed to improve seventh grade students' reading comprehension at SMP Negeri 2 Gido through Nias local culture based flashcards, using a classroom action research design across two cycles involving 31 students. Data were collected through reading comprehension tests, observation sheets, field notes, and semi-structured interviews with five students. In Cycle I, students achieved an average score of 68.06, with 51.61% meeting the KKTP (classical mastery). After refinements, including one cultural theme per meeting, interactive vocabulary activities, peer tutoring, and scaffolding, Cycle II showed improvement, with an average score of 82.74 and 100% classical mastery. Interviews suggested that culturally familiar visuals helped students understand vocabulary and texts and enhanced their motivation and confidence, although students found the amount of new vocabulary demanding. The findings suggest that Nias local culture based flashcards, combined with a controlled vocabulary load, can support reading comprehension and student engagement.

INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is one of the essential competencies in English language learning, as it enables students to obtain information, construct meaning, and develop critical thinking (Weerawong et al., 2025). Within the Merdeka Curriculum, junior high school students are expected to comprehend both explicit and implicit information in a text and relate its content to their prior knowledge. However, many EFL learners continue to struggle with reading comprehension, particularly in mastering vocabulary in context, identifying main ideas, recognizing the social function and generic structure of a text, and connecting textual information with their prior knowledge. Difficulties tend to be more pronounced when instructional materials are disconnected from students' everyday cultural experiences.

Previous studies have established that flashcards are effective in improving vocabulary mastery, word recognition, and classroom motivation (Hasanuddin & Prayoga, 2025), while other research shows that culturally relevant materials strengthen student engagement and facilitate meaning-making (Putri & Tambusai, 2025). However, these two lines of research have rarely been integrated: few studies have examined flashcards that are simultaneously visual-verbal learning tools and vehicles for local cultural content, particularly within underrepresented regional cultures such as Nias. This gap partly reflects the differing focus of the two lines of research: flashcard studies have generally concentrated on vocabulary mastery and word-level cognitive processes (e.g., Hasanuddin & Prayoga, 2025), whereas culture-based studies have tended to focus on broader instructional materials and curriculum design rather than on a specific visual-verbal medium such as flashcards (e.g., Putri & Tambusai, 2025). As a result, the potential of flashcards to simultaneously support vocabulary acquisition and cultural familiarity remains underexplored. Beyond this gap in the literature, a related but distinct need also emerges at the classroom level. At SMP Negeri 2 Gido specifically, students' low reading comprehension achievement reflected the absence of instructional media capable of addressing both their vocabulary limitations and their difficulty engaging with culturally unfamiliar materials. This classroom-level need, together with the research gap identified above, indicates that instructional media combining both cognitive and cultural dimensions of learning are needed both to extend the literature and to respond to the practical challenges faced by students in this specific context.

While the research gap outlined above indicates a general lack of empirical studies regarding Classroom Action Research (CAR) in the teaching of descriptive texts, a more pressing related issue is evident at the classroom level. This is clearly observed at SMP Negeri 2 Gido; preliminary classroom observations and interviews with the seventh grade

English teacher revealed that the majority of students face significant difficulties in comprehending descriptive texts. Observations showed that students struggled to identify the generic structure of descriptive texts and were reluctant to engage with the provided reading materials, while interviews confirmed that limited vocabulary and unfamiliarity with reading topics were recurring obstacles in most lessons. Out of 31 students, 30 (96.7%) failed to meet the Learning Objective Achievement Criteria (KKTP) score of 68, based on previous class tests administered by the teacher. Contributing factors include unfamiliar reading materials, limited vocabulary, and an inadequate understanding of the generic structure of descriptive texts, issues compounded by the use of instructional media that do not actively support contextual and meaningful reading activities.

To address this issue, this study explores the use of visual media, specifically flashcards based on local Nias culture that combine vocabulary with culturally familiar imagery as a potential instructional intervention implemented through Classroom Action Research (CAR). While previous research on culture-based English (EFL) learning media has generally relied on broad or national cultural themes rather than specific local cultures, this study fills that gap by grounding the flashcards in the local culture of Nias, a context deeply familiar to the students at the research site in their daily lives. This familiarity is expected to make the cultural references in reading materials more recognizable and meaningful to students, thereby facilitating their comprehension process. Consequently, this study aims to contribute a set of Nias culture based flashcards ready for immediate use by teachers in teaching descriptive texts, as well as a documented CAR-based implementation model that other teachers can adapt when developing similar locally contextualized reading materials. Specifically, this study seeks to examine how Nias culture based flashcards can improve the reading comprehension of seventh grade students at SMP Negeri 2 Gido and to describe the implementation of this learning medium through Classroom Action Research.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension refers to the ability to understand, interpret, and derive meaning from written texts through the interaction of word recognition, vocabulary knowledge, and background knowledge (Alshehri & Zhang, 2022). It involves several key dimensions, including identifying the main idea, recognizing references, making inferences, locating specific information, and interpreting vocabulary in context (Zapata et al., 2024). Reading comprehension develops through the interactive model of reading, which integrates bottom-

up processes such as decoding vocabulary and top-down processes such as activating prior knowledge to interpret meaning (Kamilah & Rochmat, 2024). Effective reading instruction therefore requires systematic support across pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading stages to help students activate schema, monitor comprehension, and reflect on their understanding (Siha et al., 2025).

Flashcards as Instructional Media

Flashcards are instructional tools that combine words, symbols, or pictures to help students recognize vocabulary and construct meaning through visual association (Aufa et al., 2024). Their effectiveness is grounded in Dual Coding Theory, which posits that information processed through both verbal and visual channels is retained more effectively than information delivered through a single channel (Wang et al., 2025). Empirical studies confirm that flashcards significantly improve vocabulary acquisition and word recognition among EFL learners (Hasanuddin & Prayoga, 2025) and increase classroom motivation and participation (Karimi & Amiri, 2025). However, flashcards used without contextual integration risk promoting decontextualized vocabulary learning and shallow processing (Hubner & Santa, 2020), which underscores the importance of embedding flashcards within meaningful, culturally relevant reading activities.

Nias Local Culture Based Flashcards

Culturally responsive instructional media connect learning content to students' sociocultural backgrounds, thereby increasing motivation and facilitating comprehension (Azahary & Fatimah, 2024). Nias local culture based flashcards integrate vocabulary with visual representations of familiar cultural elements such as traditional houses (*Omo Hada*) and the stone-jumping tradition (*Fahombo*) to activate students' existing schemata (Siha et al., 2025). By pairing culturally familiar images with English vocabulary, this medium is expected to support both bottom-up word recognition and top-down interpretative processing simultaneously, helping students construct meaning more effectively from descriptive texts (Weerawong et al., 2025). Prior research indicates that integrating local culture into classroom learning strengthens engagement, cultural identity, and reading comprehension performance (Putri & Tambusai, 2025).

Classroom Action Research

Classroom Action Research (CAR) is a systematic, reflective process through which educators improve classroom practices through cyclical phases of planning, action, observation, and reflection (Kemmis and McTaggart, cited in Rabgay and Kidman, (2023).

CAR is particularly suited to instructional innovation because it unifies theory and practice, allowing interventions to be continuously refined based on empirical classroom data (Darmawan & Sicat, 2025). Studies conducted in Indonesian junior high school contexts show that CAR-based reading interventions significantly improve students' reading comprehension across reflective cycles (Izzah et al., 2021), supporting its use as the design for this study.

METHOD

This study employed Classroom Action Research (CAR) to improve seventh grade students' reading comprehension through the implementation of Nias local culture based flashcards. CAR was selected because it addresses practical classroom problems through systematic, cyclical intervention, allowing instructional strategies to be continuously refined based on classroom evidence (Milkias, 2020). The study followed the model proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart, comprising four interrelated stages in each cycle: planning, action, observation, and reflection (Rabgay & Kidman, 2023).

The research was conducted at SMP Negeri 2 Gido, Nias Regency, during the even semester of the 2025/2026 academic year. The participants were 31 seventh-grade students (20 male, 11 female) from class VII-A, selected because preliminary observation and teacher interviews indicated they experienced particular difficulty identifying main ideas, locating specific information, and understanding vocabulary in descriptive texts.

Baseline data. The baseline (pre-cycle) data were obtained from the school's mid-semester summative English assessment (*Asesmen Sumatif Tengah Semester*, ASTS) for the even semester of 2025/2026, administered by the classroom English teacher to class VII-A on March 11, 2026, approximately five weeks before Cycle I. The scores were collected as documentation by the teacher and were not produced by the researcher's instruments. The ASTS was a general English assessment designed by the school, whereas the tests in Cycles I and II were researcher-developed, 20-item multiple-choice reading comprehension tests aligned with the descriptive text material taught in each cycle. The baseline scores were therefore used only to describe students' initial condition and to justify the need for intervention, while the effectiveness of the action was judged mainly by the comparison between Cycle I and Cycle II against the 85% success criterion.

The intervention implemented in this study involved the use of flashcards based on local Nias culture during the pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading stages to activate students' prior knowledge, support vocabulary recognition, and facilitate the comprehension

of descriptive texts. The effectiveness of this intervention was assessed based on two aspects: students' reading comprehension achievement, measured via test scores at the end of each cycle; and student engagement and motivation during the learning process, evaluated descriptively through classroom observations and field notes recorded at each meeting.

This study was conducted in two cycles. In Cycle I, flashcards depicting Nias villages, *Omo Hada* (traditional houses), and *Fahombo* (stone jumping) were used in the first meeting, and traditional war dances and *Baluse* (traditional shields) in the second meeting, to introduce descriptive texts about Nias culture; students worked in small groups to identify vocabulary and answer comprehension questions, followed by a class discussion. Reflection on Cycle I revealed three main issues. First, students appeared overwhelmed and confused when processing a large amount of new vocabulary alongside three cultural themes in the first session, indicating a need to reduce the material load per meeting. Second, students struggled to recall newly introduced vocabulary when transitioning to the reading text, suggesting that vocabulary reinforcement needed to be more explicit before students began reading. Third, students in small groups tended to be passive during discussions, requiring frequent teacher intervention to keep the activity on track; this indicated a need for more intensive guidance during the reading process, rather than allowing students to work independently in groups. Based on these findings, three adjustments were implemented in Cycle II: (1) using a specific cultural theme for each session with more concise material (the *Falöwa* wedding ceremony and the *Famato Harimau* tradition) to address the issue of excessive material load; (2) using a vocabulary matching game as a pre-reading activity to reinforce vocabulary retention before reading, addressing the second issue; and (3) providing more intensive scaffolding during guided reading activities, specifically closer monitoring and direction from the teacher during group work, combined with peer tutoring in which more capable students helped passive group members, to address the student passivity identified in the third point. At the end of each cycle, students took a reading comprehension test.

Data were collected using four instruments: (1) an observation checklist completed by one collaborating observer, the classroom English teacher, used to record student participation, engagement, and the implementation of instruction during each session; (2) a 20-item multiple-choice reading comprehension test, with each correct answer worth 5 points (maximum score of 100), developed by the researcher based on a test design aligned with the learning objectives and descriptive text material taught during the intervention, drawing upon instruments used in previous related studies; (3) field notes documenting the classroom atmosphere, student responses, and unexpected events; and (4) semi-structured interviews

conducted with five students after Cycle II. The students were purposively selected on the basis of their test scores to represent low, medium, and high achievement levels, so that the interviews would capture experiences across the range of the class. The interviews used a guide of 15 questions on their initial difficulties, experiences with the flashcards, perceived improvement, and suggestions; they were conducted in Indonesian, analyzed thematically using NVivo 14, and used to triangulate the quantitative findings.

Test development and validation. The reading comprehension tests were developed by the researcher as two separate sets, one for each cycle, each consisting of 20 multiple-choice items with descriptive texts on the Nias cultural topics taught in that cycle. Each set was built from a test blueprint aligned with the learning outcomes and learning objectives for descriptive texts in Phase D of the Merdeka Curriculum, covering identifying main ideas, locating specific information, and understanding vocabulary in context, and the item format drew on instruments used in previous related studies. Content validity was established through expert judgment: three validators (an English lecturer and two English teachers) assessed the instrument on material, construction, and language criteria using a four-point scale, and rated the criteria as valid (4) and the instrument as very appropriate for use without revision. A separate reliability coefficient was not computed, and the two test sets were not statistically equated; this is acknowledged as a limitation.

Quantitative data were analyzed by calculating the mean reading comprehension score for each cycle using the formula $\bar{X} = \Sigma X/N$, where ΣX is the total score, and N is the number of students. These mean scores and mastery percentages were used descriptively to track improvement in students' reading comprehension across cycles, rather than to establish statistical effectiveness through inferential testing. Classical completeness (KK) was calculated as the percentage of students achieving the Criteria for the Achievement of Learning Objectives (KKTP; referred to as KKM in the school's assessment document) of 68, using $KK = (\text{number of students achieving KKTP} / \text{total students}) \times 100$. The action was considered successful if at least 85% of students achieved the KKTP. This threshold was set before the intervention, following the classical mastery criterion commonly applied in Indonesian classroom action research (Laoli, 2026), and it requires that nearly the whole class, rather than only a simple majority, reach the mastery standard. Qualitative data from the observation checklists, field notes, and interviews were analyzed following the interactive model of Miles et al. (2014), comprising data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Interview transcripts and observation records were coded and grouped into categories to identify recurring themes. For the interview data, the number of students raising

each theme was counted and reported alongside representative quotations translated from Indonesian. The credibility of the interpretation was strengthened through triangulation across the observation, field note, and interview data to check the consistency of findings across sources.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study investigated the implementation of Nias Local Culture Based Flashcards to improve the reading comprehension of seventh grade students at SMP Negeri 2 Gido. The study was conducted through two cycles of Classroom Action Research involving 31 students. Each cycle consisted of planning, action, observation, and reflection stages. The findings were obtained from reading comprehension tests, classroom observations, field notes, and student interviews.

Improvement of students' Reading Comprehension

Students' reading comprehension scores improved from the baseline to Cycle II. Baseline data were collected from the school's mid-semester summative English assessment (ASTS), which was administered by the classroom teacher on March 11, 2026, before the intervention began. In this assessment, the students' average score was 29.40, which was below the Learning Objective Achievement Criteria (KKTP) of 68, and only one student (3.23%) met that criterion. Because the ASTS was designed as a general English assessment and differed in format and content from the reading test developed by the researchers and used in these cycles, this figure was interpreted as contextual baseline information rather than a pre-test score that could be directly compared. After the implementation of the Nias Local Culture Based Flashcards in Cycle I, the average score increased to 68.06. However, only 16 out of 31 students met the KKTP, representing a mastery rate of 51.61%. Therefore, the pre-determined success criterion of 85% was not met.

Based on the reflection of Cycle I, several improvements were applied in Cycle II. The researcher focused on one cultural topic per meeting, provided explicit vocabulary scaffolding, incorporated flashcard based vocabulary matching activities, encouraged peer tutoring, and gave more targeted support to passive students. These improvements resulted in a higher mean score of 82.74 in Cycle II. All 31 students achieved scores at or above the KKTP, resulting in 100% classical mastery.

Table 1. Students' Reading Comprehension Achievement

Cycle	Mean Score	Lowest Score	Highest Score	Students Achieving KKM	Classical Mastery
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Cycle I	68.06	30	95	16 of 31	51.61%
Cycle II	82.74	70	100	31 of 31	100%

As presented in Table 1, the mean score improved by 14.68 points from Cycle I to Cycle II, and classical mastery rose from 51.61% to 100%. Relative to the school's baseline assessment (a mean of 29.40 and 3.23% mastery), both cycles showed markedly higher scores, although, as noted above, the baseline is not directly comparable. These findings indicate that the action met the research success criterion, because more than 85% of students achieved the KKTP in Cycle II.

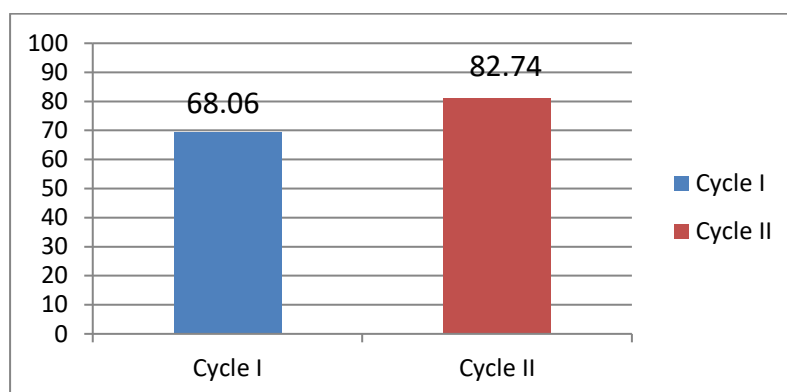


Figure 1: Students' Mean Reading Comprehension Scores in Cycle I and Cycle II

The score distribution also showed a meaningful improvement. In Cycle I, 15 students were still classified as needing improvement because their scores were below 68. In Cycle II, no student remained below the KKTP. Eleven students reached the excellent category, ten students were categorized as good, and ten students were categorized as fair.

Table 2. Distribution of Students' Reading Comprehensions

Category	Score Range	Cycle I	Cycle II
Excellent	90-100	6	11
Good	80-89	5	10
Fair	68-79	5	10
Needs Improvement	0-67	15	0
Total	-	31	31

The elimination of the needs-improvement category in Cycle II shows that the instructional revisions were effective in providing more equitable learning opportunities. The use of visual flashcards, contextual vocabulary support, guided reading, and peer discussion helped lower-achieving students improve their comprehension.

Classroom Participation and Implementation

The observation results indicated improvement in both the researcher's instructional implementation and students' classroom participation. In Cycle I, the researcher completed

92% of planned activities in the first meeting and 96% in the second meeting. In Cycle II, the researcher completed all planned activities in both meetings.

Student participation also improved throughout the action. In the first meeting of Cycle I, 86.07% of observed student activities were completed (587 of 682). This increased slightly to 86.97% in the second meeting of Cycle I (674 of 775). In Cycle II, student participation rose to 94.25% in the first meeting (672 of 713) and reached 98.39% in the second meeting (732 of 744), the highest level recorded across the four meetings.

Table 3. Classroom Observation Results

Meeting	Researcher Activities Completed	Student Activities Completed
Cycle I, Meeting 1	92.00%	86.07%
Cycle I, Meeting 2	96.00%	86.97%
Cycle II, Meeting 1	100.00%	94.25%
Cycle II, Meeting 2	100.00%	98.39%

The observation and field-note data revealed that the students gradually became more willing to observe the flashcards, repeat vocabulary, discuss texts, answer questions, and present group responses. During Cycle I, some students were passive, relied on more active classmates, and struggled with unfamiliar vocabulary. In Cycle II, students showed greater confidence and independence because they had more focused materials, repeated vocabulary practice, and clearer instructional support.

Students' Responses to Nias Local Culture Based Flashcards

Interview data were collected from five students (S1–S5) after Cycle II. The analysis identified six themes. Table 4 shows how many of the five students mentioned each theme, along with representative quotes (translated from Indonesian by the authors). Overall, the students' responses were positive and consistent: all five students reported benefits related to vocabulary, comprehension, cultural familiarity, motivation, and self-confidence, while doubts were primarily expressed regarding the number of new vocabulary words introduced in each session.

First, students reported that flashcards helped them learn unfamiliar vocabulary. The visual images and translations enabled students to associate new English words with their meanings. Repeated exposure to the vocabulary through flashcard activities also helped students remember words more easily.

Second, students stated that the flashcards supported reading comprehension. They found it easier to identify main ideas, locate specific information, and understand the content of descriptive texts after completing the vocabulary and picture-based activities.

Third, cultural familiarity supported comprehension. Topics such as *Omo Hada*, *Fahombo*, *Baluse*, *Falōwa*, and *Famato Harimau* were familiar to students because they were connected to their local culture. Therefore, the students could activate their prior knowledge while reading the English texts.

Fourth, the flashcard activities increased students' motivation, interest, participation, and confidence. The students reported that learning became more enjoyable because it included pictures, matching activities, group discussions, and cultural content. Nevertheless, students suggested limiting the number of new vocabulary items in each meeting and providing repeated practice through games or quizzes.

Table 4. Themes from Students' Interview Responses

Theme	Students (n=5)	Representative Quotation
Vocabulary development	5 of 5	"I already knew some vocabulary before reading the text, so it was easier to understand it." (S2)
Reading comprehension improvement	5 of 5	"Although some sentences are still difficult, I understand the text faster than before." (S4)
Cultural familiarity	5 of 5	"Because the content is about Nias culture that I know, I understand the text more easily." (S1)
Motivation and interest	5 of 5	"I am more interested because it is not only reading a book. There are pictures, cards, and discussions with friends, so the lesson is more enjoyable." (S4)
Participation and confidence	5 of 5	"I am more confident than before. Although sometimes I am still afraid of making mistakes, I am braver about trying to answer." (S3)
Challenges and suggestions	4 of 5 (too much new vocabulary); 1 of 5 (insufficient time)	"Sometimes I still struggle when there are too many new words, and I forget easily if they are not repeated often." (S5)

First, students reported that Flashcards helped them learn unfamiliar vocabulary. English reading had been difficult before the intervention because they often met unknown words, and all five reported that being introduced to key vocabulary through the flashcards before reading helped them understand and remember new words. Second, students stated that the flashcards supported reading comprehension, although S3 and S5 described the improvement as slight. Third, cultural familiarity supported comprehension students said the Nias topics were easier to understand because they were already familiar, and three of them (S1, S2, S4) added that they were glad to learn about their own culture in an English lesson.

Fourth, the flashcard activities increased students' motivation, which they attributed to the pictures, the cards, and discussion with peers. Fifth, all five reported being more active or confident when answering questions, although S3 and S4 said they still sometimes hesitated. Sixth, four of the five students (S1, S3, S4, S5) found the number of new words or cards in one meeting difficult to remember, and S2 felt that time was too short to cover all cards and

texts. All five suggested introducing new vocabulary in smaller amounts, three (S3, S4, S5) asked for more repetition or practice, and two (S1, S2) suggested games, quizzes, or group activities.

Discussion

The findings suggest that Nias Local Culture Based Flashcards contributed to improved reading comprehension among seventh grade students at SMP Negeri 2 Gido. The increase in mean score from 68.06 in Cycle I to 82.74 in Cycle II, and in classical mastery from 51.61% to 100%, suggests that the intervention, together with the refinements made after Cycle I, helped address students' difficulties in vocabulary, main ideas, and specific information. The school's baseline assessment (a mean of 29.40) was much lower, but because it came from a different assessment, it is treated as context for the class's starting point rather than as a measure of gain.

The effectiveness of the flashcards can be explained through three connected mechanisms. First, the flashcards provided visual support. Pictures of Nias cultural objects, ceremonies, and traditions made abstract English vocabulary more concrete. Students could connect words such as traditional house, ceremony, shield, and bride with visual representations. This support helped students understand the meaning of vocabulary before reading the descriptive texts.

Second, cultural familiarity helped students activate their background knowledge. The learning materials were related to local themes that students already knew, such as *Omo Hada*, *Fahombo*, traditional war dances, *Baluse*, *Falöwa*, and *Famato Harimau*. When students understand the topic of a text, they can devote more attention to interpreting English vocabulary, identifying main ideas, and locating details. Thus, local cultural content made the reading materials more meaningful and accessible.

Third, the improvement in Cycle II shows the importance of reflective instructional revisions in Classroom Action Research. In Cycle I, the researcher introduced too many topics in one meeting, causing time constraints and cognitive overload. Some students also depended on their classmates and needed more support with vocabulary. In Cycle II, the researcher reduced the content to one topic per meeting, added vocabulary matching activities, used peer tutoring, and provided focused scaffolding. These revisions created a more organized learning process and enabled students to engage more deeply with each text.

Compared with earlier work, the present findings both align with and qualify previous results. Consistent with flashcard studies that report gains in vocabulary and word recognition

(Aufa et al., 2023; Hasanuddin & Prayoga, 2025) and increased motivation (Karimi & Amiri, 2025), students in this study said the flashcards helped them learn and remember words and made lessons more enjoyable. However, those studies mainly measured word-level outcomes, often with younger learners, whereas this study assessed text-level comprehension in junior high school. The results therefore extend the evidence to a different outcome but cannot be compared directly in size. Karimi and Amiri's focus on vocabulary retention also raises a point this study cannot address: students said they forgot words that were not repeated, and without a delayed post-test, we cannot tell whether the gains are durable. Similarly, the finding that familiar local content helped comprehension echoes Putri and Tambusai (2025) and Azhary and Fatimah (2024), but, like those studies, ours cannot show that the cultural content itself was the active ingredient, since Cycle II also introduced peer tutoring, a matching game, and a lighter vocabulary load. Peer tutoring has been examined as a means of improving junior secondary students' comprehension of descriptive texts (Laoli, 2026), and reflective cycles in CAR are generally associated with improvement across cycles (Izzah et al., 2022); part of the Cycle II gain may therefore reflect these factors, together with students' growing familiarity with the procedure and the test format. The strongest claim the data support is thus that a combination of culturally familiar flashcards and a carefully controlled vocabulary load was associated with improved comprehension in this classroom.

The distinctive contribution of this study lies less in the use of visual aids or familiar content in itself than in how three elements were combined and refined within one classroom. First, the flashcards served two functions at once: they were a vocabulary tool, pairing pictures with English words and Indonesian meanings, and a schema-activating device, because the topics (*Omo Hada*, *Fahombo*, *Baluse*, *Falöwa*, and *Famato Harimau*) were already part of the students' daily lives. Previous flashcard studies have largely concentrated on word-level learning, whereas culture-based studies have tended to address broader materials and curriculum design (e.g., Hasanuddin & Prayoga, 2025; Putri & Tambusai, 2025). In this study, the same cards were used across the pre-, while-, and post-reading stages, so that vocabulary preview and background knowledge were addressed before students met the text. All five interviewed students said the Nias topics were easier to understand because they already knew them, and three said they were glad to learn about their own culture in an English lesson.

Second, and most specific to this context, the two cycles show that cultural familiarity did not remove the vocabulary burden. When three cultural themes were introduced in a single meeting in Cycle I, students were overwhelmed, and only 51.61% reached the KKTP.

After the material was limited to one theme per meeting and supported by a vocabulary matching game, scaffolding, and peer tutoring, all students reached it. This points to a practical design principle for similar regional classrooms: culture-based flashcards work best when paired with a small, controlled set of vocabulary and explicit pre-reading reinforcement. However, Cycle II changed several elements simultaneously, and no comparison group used non-cultural flashcards, so this study cannot isolate the effect of the cultural content itself. It documents a workable, context-specific instructional model rather than proving that culture is the active ingredient.

The interview findings support the test and observation results. Students perceived that flashcards helped them improve vocabulary knowledge, reading comprehension, interest, and confidence. However, the students' suggestions also show that flashcard-based instruction should be carefully designed. Teachers should avoid presenting excessive new vocabulary in one lesson and should provide repeated, interactive practice to strengthen vocabulary retention.

Implications and Future Improvements

The findings suggest that English teachers in regional contexts such as Nias can use local culture based flashcards as a medium for teaching reading comprehension, especially when students have limited vocabulary knowledge and low confidence. What appears most transferable is not the cultural content alone but the design of the lesson: (a) select one culturally familiar topic per meeting; (b) present it through pictures, a small set of key vocabulary with Indonesian meanings, and a short descriptive text; (c) reinforce the vocabulary before reading, for example through a matching game; and (d) support group reading with teacher scaffolding and peer tutoring. Teachers in other regions can adapt this procedure by replacing the topics with their own local culture. The use of flashcards should be integrated with guided reading, vocabulary practice, peer discussion, and individual assessment. Teachers should introduce a manageable number of vocabulary items and provide repeated exposure through matching activities, quizzes, games, or short review sessions.

This study was limited to one class of 31 students at a single school and was conducted in two cycles. The findings are therefore context-specific and should be interpreted as evidence of improvement within this particular classroom, not as results that can be generalized to all EFL learners or to other regions. Several features of the design further limit the strength of the conclusions. There was no comparison group, and Cycle II changed

several elements at the same time (the theme load, the matching game, scaffolding, and peer tutoring), so the effect of the cultural content itself cannot be separated from the effect of these refinements. The baseline scores came from a school assessment that differed from the researcher-developed tests used in the cycles, and mean scores were analyzed descriptively without inferential testing. No reliability coefficient was computed for the researcher-developed tests, and the two test sets were not statistically equated, so the difference between Cycle I and Cycle II scores may partly reflect differences in test difficulty. The interviews involved five students and were conducted by the teacher-researcher, and their responses were notably similar; they may therefore reflect social desirability and are treated as supporting evidence rather than independent proof of effectiveness. Future studies may involve more participants, comparison groups using non-cultural flashcards, longer implementation periods with delayed post-tests, different school contexts, other text genres, or digital versions of culture-based flashcards. Further research may also examine the effects of Nias local culture-based materials on vocabulary retention, writing, speaking, listening, motivation, and intercultural awareness.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that, in this seventh grade class at SMP Negeri 2 Gido, the use of Nias local culture based flashcards, refined across two Classroom Action Research cycles, was associated with improved reading comprehension of descriptive texts. Classical mastery rose from just over half of the class in Cycle I to all students in Cycle II, exceeding the pre-determined success criterion of 85%, and the mean score also increased. The school's baseline assessment indicates a much lower starting point, although it is not directly comparable with the researcher-developed tests.

The main contribution of the study is a documented, classroom-tested way of combining three elements: Nias cultural content, visual-verbal flashcards, and reading instruction across the pre-, while-, and post-reading stages. The two cycles showed that cultural familiarity did not remove the vocabulary burden: improvement came after the material was limited to one cultural theme per meeting and supported by vocabulary matching, scaffolding, and peer tutoring. Interviews and observations suggest that the approach also increased students' motivation, confidence, and participation.

These findings are context-specific. They come from one class of 31 students and two cycles, without a comparison group, and several refinements were introduced together in Cycle II. The results should therefore be read as evidence of improvement within this

classroom rather than as proof of effectiveness for EFL learners in general. Future studies with comparison groups, more participants, and delayed post-tests could examine whether the effect is attributable to the cultural content itself and whether it lasts.

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