

# FOSTERING EMPATHY AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY THROUGH BAMBOO PUPPET-MEDIATED HIJRAH NARRATIVES: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

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**Abstract:** *This study investigates the potential of culturally embedded storytelling, specifically, bamboo puppet theatre inspired by the Islamic Hijrah narrative, to cultivate empathy and social responsibility in the context of English language education in Indonesia. Framed within a narrative inquiry methodology, the research engaged university-level English learners in the design, creation, and performance of puppet-based dramatizations of Hijrah, using English as the medium of expression. Data were gathered through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, and visual-textual analysis of scripts and performances. Thematic analysis revealed four interconnected areas of development: moral reflection through the puppet-making process; empathic engagement through storytelling in a second language; the emergence of social responsibility through shared ethical dialogue; and the affirmation of cultural identity within language learning. Students did not simply retell religious narratives—they personalized them, linking historical and spiritual themes to contemporary issues such as displacement, justice, and ecological awareness. The use of English to convey local values shifted learners' perception of the language from a foreign instrument to a platform for intercultural communication and moral agency. The project also created a space for collaborative creativity and critical thinking, promoting learner autonomy and ethical discourse. These findings support the integration of traditional art forms and narrative-based approaches into English language curricula, reinforcing the pedagogical value of culturally sustaining and emotionally resonant instruction. The study underscores the importance of holistic education where language learning intersects with character formation, cultural preservation, and global citizenship, offering an innovative framework for educators seeking to blend linguistic and moral competencies in diverse classrooms.*

**Keywords:** *Bamboo puppetry, Cultural identity, Culturally sustaining pedagogy, Empathy, English language learning, Hijrah, Multimodal literacy, Narrative pedagogy, Social responsibility, Values-based education*

## Introduction

Storytelling remains a vital medium for education, moral development, and cultural continuity, particularly in contexts that emphasize values-based learning. In language education, narrative forms are increasingly recognized for their ability to engage learners cognitively, emotionally, and socially (Nikolajeva, 2014). Within Indonesia, traditional storytelling practices such as *wayang*, a form of shadow or bamboo puppet theatre, offer a rich cultural vehicle that can be integrated into modern pedagogies. These performances are not merely artistic expressions; they carry philosophical, religious, and ethical teachings that shape and reflect community values. By incorporating *wayang* into English language learning, educators can bridge global competencies with local cultural values, transforming the classroom into a space for intercultural dialogue and ethical reflection.

A particularly powerful thematic focus within Islamic narratives is the story of *Hijrah*, referring not only to the Prophet Muhammad's physical migration from Mecca to Medina but also to a broader spiritual journey toward moral integrity, sacrifice, and social justice. In educational and religious discourse, *Hijrah* resonates with contemporary issues such as identity, displacement, and ethical reorientation (Nasr, 2009). When dramatized through traditional puppet media, this narrative invites learners to inhabit its emotional and moral dimensions. In such contexts, empathy is not only discussed, it is experienced. This kind of embodied, affective engagement aligns closely with the goals of moral education and second language acquisition.

In the current educational landscape, fostering empathy and social responsibility has taken on renewed importance. The challenges posed by digital hyperconnectivity, global crises, and social fragmentation underscore the urgent need for education that cultivates civic-mindedness, intercultural sensitivity, and emotional intelligence. Zembylas (2003) argues that empathy in education must extend beyond emotional resonance to become an ethical and political stance, one that acknowledges suffering and inspires responsible action. Likewise, UNESCO's (2021) *Futures of Education* report calls for a transformation of education systems to promote solidarity, care, and a deeper sense of shared human destiny. Arts-based education, when paired with narrative pedagogy, is uniquely positioned to support this vision by guiding students through ethical dilemmas via creative, reflective, and participatory experiences.

While narrative pedagogy and empathy-based learning have gained attention globally, few studies have explored how indigenous storytelling forms such as *wayang* can be leveraged in English language education to cultivate moral and civic engagement, particularly through spiritually rooted narratives like *Hijrah*. This study responds to that gap by situating the *Hijrah* narrative within a culturally embedded, multimodal pedagogical practice that merges local art forms with second language learning.

Integrating traditional media such as bamboo puppets into English language learning also reflects the principles of culturally sustaining pedagogy, which maintains that students thrive when their cultural identities are affirmed within the classroom (Peristeris, 2017). As both cultural artifact and performative form, *wayang* allows learners to voice their values and

histories through a global language, reinforcing both linguistic competence and moral awareness. Additionally, multimodal storytelling through puppetry engages students not only linguistically, but also visually, physically, and emotionally, resulting in a holistic and deeply meaningful learning experience. This approach echoes the work of Kress (2010) and Rowsell and Walsh (2011), who emphasize that learning occurs through layered modes of communication and embodied interaction.

The integration of English language education with ethical storytelling via puppet theatre thus creates a fertile space for exploring core principles of *Hijrah*, such as personal transformation, social justice, and moral courage, in a global communicative medium. This study explores how bamboo puppet performances based on the *Hijrah* narrative foster empathy and social responsibility among English language learners in Indonesia. Drawing on qualitative data, including student reflections, performance observations, and thematic analysis, the research investigates how culturally embedded, narrative-based pedagogy enhances students' emotional and ethical engagement while also strengthening their communicative abilities in English. It proposes that traditional media can meaningfully mediate complex ethical ideas, bridging local identity with global citizenship in transformative ways.

### Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon multiple intersecting theoretical lenses to explore how bamboo-puppet-mediated storytelling of the Hijrah narrative fosters empathy and social responsibility among English language learners. These include theories of empathic development, civic and character education, multimodal literacy, narrative pedagogy, and culturally responsive teaching. Together, these perspectives illuminate the transformative potential of a culturally grounded, arts-based learning approach. Taken together in this study, the lenses operate as a single working logic: bamboo-puppet Hijrah storytelling (learning environment) → empathy activation (affective mechanism) → social responsibility (disposition), enabled by multimodal design and stabilised by culturally responsive and narrative pedagogy. The framework therefore specifies how each lens contributes to a pathway, rather than listing them descriptively.

Empathy is central to this study and is understood not as a fixed trait but as a developmental and educable capacity. Hoffman's (2011) theory of empathic development conceptualises empathy as an affective response that evolves from emotional contagion in early childhood to advanced empathic concern in adulthood, where it informs altruism and social justice. In educational settings, empathy can be cultivated by inviting learners to imaginatively and emotionally engage with others' experiences, especially those outside their immediate cultural or social context. The Hijrah narrative, dramatised through puppetry, offers a powerful medium for students to engage with moral dilemmas, social hardship, and spiritual resilience in an emotionally resonant and pedagogically rich way. For this study, empathy functions as the proximal mechanism: role-taking and imaginative identification during performance are expected to trigger perspective-taking and empathic concern, observable in students' language of reasons, their stance toward characters, and their willingness to revisit initial judgements.

Closely related is the concept of social responsibility, which refers to individuals' ethical commitment to contribute positively to their communities. Social responsibility is increasingly emphasised in global education policies, particularly within UNESCO's frameworks for Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship Education (UNESCO, 2015). These approaches promote not only cognitive skills but also moral dispositions such as

compassion, justice, and collective well-being. In civic and character education, social responsibility emerges from the intersection of moral reflection, empathy, and active participation (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004). In this study, social responsibility is explored through students' engagement with Hijrah themes—sacrifice, community, justice—and their collaborative enactment through storytelling, which requires reflection, dialogue, and mutual support. Accordingly, social responsibility is positioned as a downstream outcome that appears when empathic concern is paired with reflective dialogue and collaborative decision-making; we attend to indicators such as prosocial intent, community-oriented reasoning, and references to justice and collective well-being in students' talk and artefacts.

A third theoretical foundation is multimodal literacy, which recognises that learners make meaning not only through language but through multiple semiotic resources—visual, spatial, gestural, and auditory (Kress, 2010). Puppet theatre naturally embodies these modes. Through scriptwriting, puppet design, movement, and performance, students express and interpret complex ideas and emotions in multiple forms. Rowsell and Walsh (2011) argue that such multimodal engagement enhances both cognitive processing and emotional depth, crucial when navigating moral narratives. In this study, bamboo puppetry becomes the multimodal interface through which learners encounter and perform ethical themes in English. Within the model, multimodality is the amplifier: coordinated use of verbal, visual, gestural, and auditory modes is expected to lower cognitive load, deepen affect, and make ethical arguments more concrete; we therefore look for mode–meaning alignment (for example, how movement, gaze, or sound supports a stated moral claim) as an analytic anchor.

Further grounding this work are the principles of narrative pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching. Narrative pedagogy views storytelling not just as a technique, but as a fundamental way of knowing, one that centres human experience as a source of knowledge (Diekelmann, 2001). When students construct and perform the Hijrah narrative, they are not simply retelling events; they are interpreting, embodying, and making meaning from values. This aligns with Connelly and Clandinin's (2006) view of narrative inquiry, which positions learners as both storytellers and agents of their learning. In the present framework, narrative pedagogy provides the reasoning engine: as students design conflict, consequences, and resolution, they must justify actions and weigh alternatives. We therefore track the quality of moral justification—clarity of reasons, acknowledgement of consequences, and responsiveness to challenge—during planning and performance.

Culturally responsive pedagogy, as outlined by Gay (2010), emphasises the importance of anchoring learning in students' cultural knowledge and lived experiences. In this case, the use of Islamic themes and traditional wayang bambu aligns English language learning with learners' cultural identities, enhancing both engagement and relevance. Peristeris (2017) further supports this in their model of culturally sustaining pedagogy, which argues that education should not merely accommodate cultural diversity but actively sustain and elevate it. Through the integration of traditional performance art and Islamic moral narrative, students are empowered to bring local wisdom into global discourse. In the framework, culturally responsive teaching operates as a contextual moderator: identity alignment can heighten engagement, while plural classrooms require inclusive framing to avoid essentialism; we therefore note boundary conditions (for example, how themes are introduced and whose voices are centred) when interpreting effects.

Integrative propositions. P1: Puppet-mediated Hijrah storytelling will increase empathy through role-taking and identification. P2: Gains in empathy, combined with structured reflection, will predict social-responsibility talk and intent. P3: The quality of multimodality (mode–meaning alignment) will amplify these effects. P4: Cultural alignment and inclusive framing will moderate outcomes. These propositions turn the framework from a broad inventory into a testable pathway that links the learning environment, mechanisms, and outcomes without altering the study’s theoretical content.

## Literature Review

The intersection of performance, moral education, and language learning has drawn increasing attention from educators seeking to develop more meaningful, culturally relevant pedagogies. Puppet theatre, particularly in traditional forms like shadow puppetry and localized adaptations, has been recognized as a pedagogical tool that fosters not only engagement but also ethical reflection and social awareness. Smith (2019) argues that puppetry acts as a reflective mirror of human experience, allowing learners to explore themes such as conflict, justice, and transformation through symbolic representation. Belliveau (2006) further notes that puppets enable a degree of emotional distancing that helps learners engage with difficult issues in a safe but emotionally resonant way. In Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, traditional puppet arts such as wayang kulit and wayang bambu are deeply embedded with moral and spiritual teachings, historically used to transmit communal values across generations. At this point, the extant work suggests two testable mechanisms: aesthetic distance that enables safe moral deliberation, and embodied role-taking that prompts learners to articulate and justify a character’s choices. What remains under-specified is how these mechanisms operate moment-to-moment in classroom activity—namely, which parts of the learning sequence move students from watching to reasoning about moral choice.

A growing body of scholarship also supports the integration of indigenous arts into language education. Embedding local art forms in foreign language classrooms not only enhances learner motivation but also affirms cultural identity and preserves traditional knowledge (McCarty & Lee, 2014). In the Indonesian context, Belliveau (2006) highlights the use of traditional performance arts to foster cultural pride and values-based learning in English instruction. This practice exemplifies what Canagarajah (2005) calls “linguistic hybridity”, where English becomes a bridge for expressing local knowledge rather than a replacement for it. Such approaches align with the concept of “glocalization” in education, in which global communication skills are cultivated without sacrificing local wisdom and cultural depth (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002). Analytically, indigenous arts function not merely as contextual decoration but as epistemic resources that legitimise local moral knowledge within ELL. Yet the direct links between such integration and specific affective outcomes—such as empathy and prosocial intent—are rarely traced, including the task and facilitation conditions under which these benefits materialise.

Storytelling itself has long been recognized in educational literature as a medium for building empathy. Bruner (1996) emphasizes that narrative structures help learners make sense of experience and understand moral complexities. More recent studies by Davis (1996) and Ewing (2010) affirm that narrative methods, oral, written, or performative, support perspective-taking, especially when learners identify with characters’ ethical dilemmas. In puppetry, learners give voice to characters from a moral tale such as Hijrah, enacting values like perseverance or justice through performance. This process fosters both emotional resonance and cognitive engagement

with moral themes. Taken together, this literature implies a processual chain: narrative transportation → identification with characters → perspective-taking and moral justification. A remaining gap is that few ELL studies specify which narrative features (e.g., the type of conflict and stakes) or which classroom moves (e.g., challenge, counterexample, use of evidence) most strongly predict gains in empathy.

The Hijrah narrative, traditionally taught in Islamic education, has taken on broader metaphorical meanings in contemporary scholarship. Beyond the historical migration from Mecca to Medina, Hijrah is increasingly interpreted as a metaphor for spiritual renewal, ethical transformation, and social responsibility (Nasr, 2009; Rahman, 1982). These themes have relevance in education, as they model resilience, moral commitment, and communal solidarity, values that align with goals of character education and civic learning. At the same time, employing Hijrah in plural classrooms introduces boundary conditions: it risks essentialism if framed prescriptively, yet it can support inclusion when treated as an open moral metaphor. The present discussion therefore attends to how meanings are negotiated rather than imposed.

Finally, using English as a medium for expressing local values represents a key strategy in culturally responsive language teaching. Scholars such as Kirkpatrick (2012) and Smith (2012) emphasize that English should not be treated as culturally neutral but as a flexible medium through which indigenous knowledge can be expressed globally. This is particularly important in multilingual and postcolonial societies, where language learning is often entangled with questions of identity. When students use English to narrate the Hijrah story through bamboo puppet they are engaging in what Byram (2008) calls “intercultural citizenship”, learning to communicate across cultures while remaining rooted in their own. Positioning English as a vehicle for local values also raises questions of audience and power—whose voices are amplified and how local meanings are recontextualised for wider publics—so “intercultural citizenship” is used here as an evaluative lens rather than an assumed outcome.

Taken together, this literature affirms that the integration of moral narratives, indigenous art forms, and second language learning can foster not only language development but also empathy, cultural identity, and social responsibility. Building on these insights, the present review identifies three specific gaps: (1) mechanism-level links between performance and moral reasoning, (2) the conditions under which indigenous arts contribute to empathy and prosocial orientations, and (3) how English-medium moral storytelling negotiates identity and audience. In response, the study will operationalise outcomes through indicators of perspective-taking, empathic concern, and prosocial intent.

## Methodology

The study used a qualitative, narrative-inquiry design to examine how English language learners cultivate empathy and social responsibility through creating and performing bamboo-puppet Hijrah stories. Anchored in an interpretivist stance, it treated learners’ lived experience—planning, performing, and reflecting on moral choices—as the core unit of analysis. The design and analytic procedures were specified in advance, with any adjustments recorded in reflexive memos to preserve transparency.

Participants were 15 university students (ages 18–22) enrolled in a language-and-culture elective at a private Indonesian university, plus two instructors who served as facilitators and co-designers. Students had intermediate to upper-intermediate English proficiency and joined

voluntarily as part of a module on cultural expression and ethical communication. Purposive, criterion-based sampling guided recruitment; no incentives were offered, grading was kept separate from research tasks, and practitioner bias was mitigated through reflexive journaling. The sample size (n=15) was justified by information power and monitored for saturation.

Data were gathered across six weeks using multiple methods for depth and triangulation. Participant observation covered puppet-making, rehearsals, and performances, focusing on group dynamics, decision points, emotional cues, and moments of ethical reasoning. Field notes were supplemented by photographs and video to capture embodied, multimodal learning. Sessions were audio-video recorded with a fixed camera, files were encrypted and stored on a university server, and Indonesian expressions in transcripts were preserved verbatim with brief English glosses.

Further evidence came from semi-structured interviews and written reflections, complemented by analysis of creative artefacts. Each student completed a 25–40 minute interview (individually or in small groups), primarily in English with optional Indonesian; transcripts were checked by participants for accuracy. Students also submitted two English reflections—after story design and after performance—linking narrative events to personal and community ethics, with occasional Indonesian phrases retained where needed. Finally, scripts, character designs, stage layouts, and performance videos were examined for how learners represented moral conflict, motivation, and transformation; an artefact log tracked group IDs, version histories, and the rationale for design changes.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic approach. All qualitative data—interview transcripts, journal reflections, and observation notes—were coded inductively so that patterns and meanings emerged from the data. Initial codes focused on emotional vocabulary, value-laden language, and instances of intercultural awareness. These codes were clustered into broader themes such as understanding others, moral reflection, language confidence, cultural pride, and spiritual growth. Themes were refined iteratively through repeated reading and cross-comparison across data sources to enhance coherence and validity. Coding proceeded in three waves: exploratory open coding; consolidation into a codebook with definitions, inclusion/exclusion rules, and examples; and axial mapping of relationships among themes. To strengthen dependability, about one-fifth of the corpus (balanced across data types) was double-coded after a brief calibration exercise; disagreements were resolved through discussion and, where necessary, by returning to the raw media. Analysis was managed in qualitative analysis software to keep a clear chain of evidence from excerpts to claims and to link each theme to its supporting data.

To ensure the trustworthiness of findings, several strategies were used. Member checking invited participants to review both their transcripts and summaries of emerging themes. Triangulation drew on observations, interviews, journals, and performance artefacts. The lead researcher maintained a reflexive journal to track positionality, biases, and analytic decisions throughout. An audit trail (protocols, instruments, memos, decision logs) supported dependability and confirmability, while thick description of the course context and cohort characteristics supported transferability. Ethical approval was granted by the host institution, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and pseudonyms were used. Students could opt out of recording; facilitators did not grade the work of research participants for the study.

Empathy and social responsibility were treated as educable dispositions with observable indicators and were assessed qualitatively across the corpus. For empathy, attention was paid to perspective-taking (for instance, explicit adoption of another's viewpoint or acknowledgement of a competing standpoint), to expressions of empathic concern (language of care or compassion directed toward a character or community), and to a willingness to revise one's stance after new information or challenge. For social responsibility, the analysis traced statements of intent to act for communal benefit, the use of reasoning that referenced fairness, justice, or collective well-being, and evidence of collaborative agency in group decisions. Each indicator was applied through a simple three-level rubric across relevant excerpts—absent or implicit, present at a basic level, and developed or sustained with reasons—while exemplar quotations and still frames were compiled to anchor interpretation. Descriptive counts and small co-occurrence checks, such as the pairing of perspective-taking with prosocial intent, were used to support the qualitative reading rather than to claim statistical generalisation. In the findings, each research question is linked to a concise summary table that notes the dominant themes, the indicators that substantiate them, and the data sources from which the illustrative evidence is drawn, ensuring that every claim remains traceable to concrete instances in the corpus. Finally, the study acknowledges its single-site context, the practitioner-researcher role, and the qualitative, non-generalising intent; these boundary conditions are addressed through transparent procedures, triangulation, and reflexive practice.

### Findings and Discussions

The analysis of student reflections, interviews, observational data, and performance artifacts revealed four interrelated themes that illustrate how the bamboo puppet-mediated *Hijrah* project fostered empathy, social responsibility, and moral reflection within English language learning. These findings align with the study's core premise, that culturally embedded narrative performance can serve as a powerful vehicle for both language development and ethical education to guide interpretation, the four themes were derived through cross-source convergence: patterns were traced across reflective journals, interviews, observation notes, and performance artifacts, with brief descriptive counts and co-occurrence checks used only to support—not replace—qualitative interpretation.

#### Theme 1: Puppet-Making as a Medium of Moral Reflection

The puppet-making process was not merely an artistic or linguistic task; it became a reflective space for students to internalize and express the ethical dimensions of the *Hijrah* narrative. Initially, many students approached the project with a textbook understanding of *Hijrah*, as a religious-historical event centered on the Prophet Muhammad's migration from Mecca to Medina. However, through collaborative discussion, character development, and visual storytelling, they began to reinterpret *Hijrah* as a personal metaphor for struggle, ethical transformation, and purposeful moral direction. This reinterpretation aligns with Nasr's (2009) conception of *Hijrah* as a perennial symbol of inner purification and spiritual renewal within the Islamic worldview.

One participant reflected in their journal:

“Making the puppet for the main character reminded me of my own challenge to move away from bad habits. It's not only Prophet Muhammad's story, it is our story too.”

Such reflections demonstrate how the creative process facilitated moral engagement. Designing characters who embodied virtues like courage, sacrifice, or faith allowed students to materialize



abstract ethical principles through artistic forms. This externalization of internal values is supported by Kress's (2010) theory of multimodality, which proposes that meaning-making extends beyond linguistic codes to include visual, gestural, and spatial modes. In this context, the puppet became a semiotic resource, a tool through which students explored and communicated ethical meaning, grounded in both religious tradition and personal narrative.

The immersive nature of the activity further enabled what Rowsell and Walsh (2011) call "embodied literacy," where learners engage deeply with abstract ideas through physical, multimodal expression. As students cut, painted, and manipulated their puppets, they were simultaneously crafting identities and ethical worldviews. This process resonates with Diekelmann's (2001) narrative pedagogy, which emphasizes that moral understanding often emerges through lived and performed experience rather than abstract discussion.

Collaboration also played a critical role. As students negotiated storylines, developed character arcs, and debated moral outcomes, they participated in what Bruner (1996) identifies as narrative cognition, the ability to reflect on intention, consequence, and ethical ambiguity through story. These peer dialogues contributed to a collective sense-making process in which moral reasoning was socially constructed and artistically realized.

In short, puppet-making acted as both a reflective and generative space: reflective in that it prompted learners to connect the *Hijrah* journey with their own ethical challenges; generative in that it enabled them to transform those insights into shared artistic expression. This supports Belliveau's (2006) assertion that "embodied storytelling empowers learners to perform ethics, not merely articulate them." Taken together, these findings suggest that when local storytelling forms like puppet theatre are used as pedagogical tools, students can actively construct meaning, values, and voice, fulfilling both linguistic and ethical objectives. Convergence for this theme appeared across data sources: journals linked design choices to personal moral challenges, interviews explained how character work clarified values, observation notes recorded peer debate around ethical options, and scripts and visuals encoded those choices in concrete form—evidence that puppet-making functioned as a sustained space for moral reflection rather than a one-off craft activity

## Theme 2: Empathy through Storytelling in English

Reenacting the *Hijrah* narrative in English challenged students not only to use their language skills, but also to navigate emotionally complex terrain, where they were asked to feel, express, and communicate inner moral struggles through a second language. This process required what Kress (2010) describes as a "multimodal" form of literacy and communication, one that engages learners in meaning-making through language, gesture, tone, and symbolic expression. Students were tasked with finding the right words to convey emotions such as fear, resilience, betrayal, and spiritual conviction, often collaborating to select idioms, expressions, and tones that best captured their characters' inner lives. In doing so, they weren't simply translating words, they were translating perspectives.

One student reflected in an interview:

"I had to think hard about what the character of Bilal would say when he is suffering but still believing. I tried to say it with feeling, not just words."

This act of emotionally inhabiting and articulating another's experience in a second language points to what Davis (1996) characterizes as a multidimensional model of empathy: one that

involves cognitive interpretation, affective resonance, and behavioral communication. The student's experience illustrates all three: understanding the character's context, emotionally engaging with his suffering, and performing that emotional reality through English.

The performance setting further deepened this empathic engagement. Through repeated rehearsals, students adjusted tone, inflection, facial expression, and gesture in response to feedback, thereby internalizing not only the language but also the emotional arc of their characters. In Vygotskian terms, this is a form of mediated social cognition, where tools like puppetry and performance scaffold learners' development of empathy and symbolic reasoning (Vygotsky, 1978). Here, puppetry functioned as both a literal and metaphorical medium through which learners enacted compassion, faith, and struggle in real time.

Importantly, English did not become a barrier in this process, it became a bridge. Learners had to consider how to convey culturally sacred concepts to an audience that may or may not share their values, an act requiring what Byram (2008) terms "intercultural communicative competence." This practice of perspective-taking, of anticipating how an unfamiliar audience might interpret local moral narratives, forced students to inhabit multiple points of view, a key function of empathy according to Bruner (1996).

The storytelling structure itself enhanced this process. As Bruner asserts, narratives are not merely stories, they are simulations of experience that allow us to try on different lives. By voicing characters like Prophet Muhammad, Bilal, or family members facing moral crossroads, students were engaging in what Nikolajeva (2014) calls "narrative empathy", the ability to adopt the cognitive and emotional positions of fictional others. The Hijrah story, grounded in spiritual and ethical transformation, thus became a vehicle through which learners expanded both linguistic proficiency and emotional literacy.

Socially, the performances created a shared emotional space. Peer responses, whether applause, feedback, or post-performance discussion, fostered a culture of relational empathy. As Zembylas (2003) suggests, such shared emotional labor generates "emotional capital," a communal resource that reinforces belonging, moral connection, and civic feeling. Within this collective context, learners were not just individuals practicing English, but members of a value-driven learning community.

In summary, the process of storytelling in English created a transformative opportunity for affective learning. Students engaged in the emotional labor of representing others' ethical dilemmas across cultural and linguistic borders, a task that required deep reflection, linguistic creativity, and moral imagination. These findings suggest that multimodal, narrative-based approaches, particularly those grounded in culturally sustaining pedagogy (Peristeris, 2017), offer powerful possibilities for cultivating empathy, intercultural understanding, and emotional intelligence in second language learning contexts. Evidence of empathy was not inferred from performance alone but from multiple traces: interviews that articulated standpoint shifts, journals describing felt concern for characters or communities, rehearsal observations noting adjustments of tone and gesture after feedback, and lines in English scripts that made reasons and consequences explicit—together indicating perspective-taking and empathic concern beyond language display.

### Theme 3: Social Responsibility through Shared Values

As students engaged with the *Hijrah* narrative through performance and reflection, they began to draw substantive connections between the spiritual motifs of the story and pressing social realities in their own communities. In interviews, journals, and group discussions, recurring themes included sacrifice, justice, displacement, and collective responsibility. Students did not interpret *Hijrah* as a remote or purely religious episode; rather, they reimagined it as an enduring ethical metaphor, prompting introspection about what it means to act justly and contribute meaningfully to society today.

Several student groups adapted their puppet scripts to mirror contemporary social struggles. One group portrayed a family displaced by environmental disaster, echoing the reality of climate migration; another depicted a youth navigating poverty in pursuit of education and dignity. These creative interpretations reflect Bruner's (1996) assertion that narrative enables individuals to map personal meaning onto larger moral frameworks. By reframing *Hijrah* as a present-day ethical journey, students were not only learning about historical values, but actively internalizing and localizing them.

During a post-performance debriefing, one facilitator remarked:

“The students began asking, ‘What is our Hijrah today?’ and they started talking about poverty in their communities and how young people can help.”

This moment marked a pedagogical shift, from understanding a story to envisioning its relevance in current social contexts. Students displayed early signs of what Berkowitz and Bier (2004) refer to as “moral commitment”: the synthesis of moral understanding with a motivation toward prosocial behavior. Crucially, this commitment was not imposed through instruction, but emerged organically from the interplay between narrative engagement, collaborative learning, and personal reflection.

The performative process itself reinforced principles of participatory ethics. As students co-wrote scripts, negotiated plot developments, and divided performance roles, they enacted what Gay (2018) describes as culturally responsive collaboration, where mutual support and shared purpose become part of the learning environment. Students coached one another on pronunciation, provided emotional encouragement, and celebrated one another's contributions. This mirrored the inclusive ethos of UNESCO's (2015, 2021) Global Citizenship Education (GCED), which calls for pedagogies that cultivate solidarity, civic agency, and commitment to sustainable development.

A notable, though unanticipated, layer of ethical awareness emerged from the materiality of the puppet-making process itself. Many students expressed pride in using bamboo, an accessible, biodegradable, and culturally significant material, instead of plastic. Some explicitly associated this choice with values of humility, sustainability, and care for creation. Though not prompted by curriculum, these reflections echo the Islamic principle of environmental stewardship (*khalifah*) and suggest an emergent ecological consciousness among participants.

In sum, the students' engagement with the *Hijrah* narrative transcended academic exercise. Through collaborative storytelling, they not only interpreted moral values but embodied them, developing a nuanced awareness of their responsibilities to self, others, and the environment. They began to see themselves not merely as language learners but as ethically oriented

individuals with the capacity to enact change. This outcome affirms Peristeris' (2017) conception of culturally sustaining pedagogy as a dual vehicle for cultural affirmation and civic empowerment. The bamboo puppet project thus served as a pedagogical bridge, linking linguistic practice with real-world ethical imagination. indicators of social responsibility co-occurred across sources: scripts framed actions in terms of fairness and communal benefit, interviews and debriefs discussed feasible contributions, and observations documented collaborative agency in task decisions—suggesting movement from moral understanding toward prosocial intent within the project's scope

#### **Theme 4: Cultural Expression in Language Learning**

One of the most profound outcomes of the bamboo puppet-mediated *Hijrah* project was the affirmation of students' cultural identity and creative agency within English language learning. Across reflective journals and interviews, participants expressed a strong sense of empowerment and pride in being able to share their religious and cultural narratives through a global medium. Unlike conventional language learning tasks, often centered on imported texts, Western norms, or decontextualized grammar drills—this project positioned students as cultural authors. They were not merely learning a language; they were using it to express who they are.

As one student remarked:

“Usually, we use English for foreign stories or textbook topics. But this time, I felt like I was showing who we are, in our way, in English.”

This statement illustrates the transformative impact of culturally sustaining pedagogy, as described by Peristeris (2017). Instead of being required to assimilate into dominant linguistic or cultural paradigms, students were given space to assert their own values and voices. English, often perceived as an external or foreign system, became a tool for narrating indigenous stories with global resonance.

The use of *bamboo puppets* distinctly Indonesian puppetry tradition, offered a multimodal platform for this cultural expression. As Kress (2010) argues, literacy is not limited to alphabetic texts; it is constructed through multiple semiotic resources including images, gestures, spatial arrangements, and material artifacts. In crafting their puppets, scripting in English, and choreographing their performances, students enacted what Rowsell and Walsh (2011) term *intervisual literacy*: the fluid blending of visual, verbal, and cultural elements to make meaning. The bamboo puppets became more than props, they were material embodiments of cultural values such as sincerity, humility, and spiritual resilience.

Importantly, the project helped disrupt perceived hierarchies between English and local traditions. Rather than experiencing English as a culturally neutral or colonizing force, students appropriated the language to express their own worldviews, reflecting Canagarajah's (2005) notion of “reclaiming the local” in global language practices. In this context, English was not simply a language of instruction, but a means of reasserting Indonesian Islamic narratives within a global communicative space.

The project also illustrates the potential of hybrid literacy practices, where global and local knowledge systems interact productively. By embedding the *Hijrah* narrative into a traditional Indonesian art form and expressing it in English, students engaged in what McCarty and Lee (2014) describe as culturally sustaining/revitalizing pedagogy. Such an approach does not

merely tolerate cultural diversity, it revitalizes and celebrates it through meaningful pedagogical design. Students were not only learning language and moral themes; they were performing acts of cultural resilience, asserting continuity with ancestral knowledge while navigating contemporary, multilingual realities.

Furthermore, this cultural-linguistic hybridity contributed to deeper learner motivation and emotional engagement. As Bruner (1996) notes, storytelling is a vehicle for shaping identity and meaning. In this project, the act of storytelling allowed students to become not just learners but agents, curating and communicating their community's values in ways that felt authentic, relevant, and powerful.

In sum, this theme reveals that English language classrooms, when grounded in local culture and creative performance, can serve as dynamic spaces for identity affirmation, narrative ownership, and intercultural expression. The students' ability to articulate Islamic ethical values through bamboo puppetry and English dialogue demonstrates how literacy, as Kress (2010) reminds us, is always ideological. Through this project, students learned to value their cultural heritage and linguistic agency as interconnected, reinforcing their ability to participate in moral and global conversations with confidence and authenticity. Triangulation also supported this theme: journals and interviews voiced pride and ownership, observation notes recorded moments when peers validated cultural expression, and artifacts materialized local values through design, staging, and English dialogue; rather than positioning English as neutral, students appropriated it to carry local meanings in a public performance context

## Conclusions

This study has examined how the integration of bamboo puppet performance and the *Hijrah* narrative into English language education can foster empathy and social responsibility among university students in Indonesia. Employing a qualitative narrative inquiry approach, the research drew upon observations, interviews, reflective journals, and performance artifacts to illuminate the ways in which culturally embedded storytelling can support both moral and linguistic development. The findings suggest that when traditional art forms are mobilized in second language learning contexts, they create spaces where ethical engagement, emotional resonance, and identity affirmation naturally emerge.

Rather than viewing the puppet project as a supplemental artistic exercise, students experienced it as a meaningful journey of reflection and expression. The process of designing characters, scripting in English, and performing spiritual and moral dilemmas allowed them to inhabit the *Hijrah* narrative not only cognitively but emotionally. Through this embodied and collaborative pedagogy, students developed empathy—by imagining and articulating the inner lives of others, and began to engage with pressing social themes such as sacrifice, justice, and communal care. These outcomes align with broader educational goals related to global citizenship, intercultural understanding, and character formation.

Importantly, the use of *wayang bambu* as the central storytelling medium affirmed students' cultural identity while enhancing their confidence in using English for meaningful communication. This culturally sustaining approach to pedagogy enabled learners to use a global language not as a replacement for local knowledge, but as a conduit through which that knowledge could be expressed, shared, and valued. In doing so, students not only improved their language proficiency, but also repositioned themselves as narrators and moral agents within their own educational narratives.

Beyond its local relevance, the study speaks to the wider possibilities of integrating traditional storytelling and multimodal performance into language classrooms worldwide. As education increasingly emphasizes emotional intelligence, civic engagement, and ethical reasoning, the findings suggest that these outcomes are best cultivated not through didactic instruction alone, but through creative, student-centered pedagogies that connect learning to lived experience. The bamboo puppet–Hijrah project exemplifies how culturally rooted forms can mediate moral imagination and social learning in dynamic, transformative ways.

In conclusion, this study encourages educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers to reimagine language learning as a space for holistic development, where cultural expression, ethical inquiry, and linguistic practice converge. Traditional narratives and indigenous art forms should not be confined to heritage courses or extracurricular activities; they can serve as core elements in building an inclusive, empathetic, and socially responsible generation of global communicators.

### Implication

The outcomes of this study carry significant implications for educators, curriculum developers, and researchers committed to enriching the moral and emotional dimensions of language education through culturally relevant, creative methodologies. The integration of bamboo puppet theatre and the *Hijrah* narrative offers a compelling model for how traditional storytelling can foster empathy, social responsibility, and linguistic growth within English language learning environments.

### For Language Teachers

This study underscores the pedagogical potential of using culturally rooted approaches—such as *wayang bambu* and Islamic narrative traditions—to advance values-based education in English classrooms. Rather than relying solely on textbook-driven instruction, teachers are encouraged to facilitate experiential learning that weaves together moral storytelling, performative expression, and collaborative reflection. By anchoring ethical inquiry in familiar cultural narratives like *Hijrah*, educators can help students explore complex emotional and social themes through a language they are still acquiring. Such integration transforms the language classroom into a space where linguistic development intersects with moral reasoning and identity formation.

Moreover, the inclusion of performance and puppetry encourages emotional expression and perspective-taking, two critical aspects of empathic communication. When students embody characters, voice inner conflicts, and co-create narratives with peers, they move beyond rote language use toward meaningful, situated dialogue. These pedagogical strategies not only support language acquisition but also align with the broader aims of global citizenship education and intercultural competence.

### For Curriculum Developers

The findings advocate for curricular designs that intentionally combine local cultural forms with 21st-century educational goals, such as creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and emotional intelligence. Curriculum frameworks should allow space for project-based learning experiences that emphasize both moral imagination and communicative fluency. Integrating indigenous art forms like *wayang bambu* can serve as a powerful means of interdisciplinary learning, bridging ethics, literature, visual arts, and language in cohesive, engaging ways.

Importantly, curriculum developers are urged to position traditional narratives not as peripheral content, but as core components of language learning that reflect students' lived realities. Doing so affirms cultural identity and empowers learners to use English as a medium of self-expression and ethical engagement. In increasingly multicultural and multilingual classrooms, such approaches also promote equity and inclusion, enabling diverse students to bring their own cultural resources into the learning process.

### **For Future Research**

This study opens several pathways for further investigation. Future research could explore how narrative-based, culturally grounded pedagogies function in cross-cultural or multilingual contexts, particularly in comparative studies involving different religious or artistic traditions. Understanding how learners from various cultural backgrounds engage with local stories in a global language could provide insights into the adaptability and scalability of this model. Longitudinal studies are also needed to assess the sustained impact of such pedagogies on learners' empathy, civic attitudes, and language confidence. Do the emotional and ethical gains observed during a single project endure over time? Do they influence students' participation in social or intercultural initiatives beyond the classroom? These are questions that merit deeper exploration.

Additionally, future researchers might examine the pedagogical potential of other traditional media—such as oral poetry, indigenous dance, storytelling circles, or textile arts—as vehicles for moral and language education. By broadening the repertoire of culturally sustaining tools, educators can continue to design learning experiences that are both locally meaningful and globally resonant.

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The authors declare that this research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest. No competing interests exist with funders or institutions

### **Authors' contributions**

Dini Hidayati conceptualized the research idea, developed the methodological framework, and led the data collection and analysis. Marhamah contributed to the literature review, theoretical framing, and drafting of the manuscript. Both authors reviewed and approved the final version of the article for submission.

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