p-ISSN 2301-7554, e-ISSN 2541-3643
Volume 13, Issue 3, October 2025

ENGLISH REVIEW
Journal of English Education
Published by
English Language Study Program, Faculty of Teachers Training & Education, Universitas Kuningan, Indonesia in collaboration with AISEE (The Association of Indonesian Scholars of English Education)
AISEE

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE E-BOOKS FOR YOUNG EFL LEARNERS: A SPEECH ACT APPROACH

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APA Citation: Tarihoran, I. H., Sartika., & Jazadi, I. (2025). Culturally responsive e-books for young EFL learners: a speech act approach. *English Review: Journal of English Education, 13*(3), 861-874. https://doi.org/10.25134/erjee.v13i3.27

Received: 23-06-2025 Accepted: 22-08-2025 Published: 30-10-2025

Abstract: This study explores the integration of speech act theory into culturally responsive English e-books designed for young EFL learners in Indonesia, with a focus on Sumbawanese cultural contexts. Using a modified research and development (R&D) approach, ten short stories grounded in local culture were developed and revised through expert validation and learner feedback. Twenty students of sixth-grade elementary school from a public school in Sumbawa were involved as target users for testing the e-books. The stories embedded representative, directive, expressive, and commissive speech acts in character dialogues to enhance pragmatic clarity and narrative engagement. Findings indicate that learners initially struggled to interpret indirect speech acts, prompting revisions toward more direct and transparent expressions. The inclusion of culturally relevant contexts and well-scaffolded dialogue led to improved comprehension, with over 85% of participants accurately interpreting the characters' intentions and moral messages. Learners also reported increased emotional connection to the stories when expressive speech was used in key narrative moments. This study demonstrates that integrating pragmatics and cultural content in early ELT materials can improve not only linguistic understanding but also identity affirmation and narrative literacy. The speech act-informed approach provides a practical model for designing inclusive, engaging storybooks that align with principles of culturally responsive pedagogy. These findings have implications for English materials development, teacher training, and curriculum policy in multilingual EFL settings.

Keywords: *speech acts; children's literature; culturally responsive ELT; dialogue comprehension; english e-book development*

INTRODUCTION

The integration of English language learning into children's literature remains a vital yet underexplored domain in Indonesia, particularly in under-resourced regions such as Sumbawa. Despite growing digital access among young learners, the scarcity of English storybooks that reflect local culture continues to hinder literacy engagement and culturally grounded language acquisition (Hidayati et al., 2024; Xu et al., 2024). Existing materials often prioritize Western narratives, leaving indigenous elements—such as the traditional Sumbawanese dish Sepat, which includes local ingredients like terong (eggplant) and bage (tamarind)—conspicuously absent from pedagogical texts. This disconnect can alienate young readers from the learning content, weakening their cultural identity and language retention. To address this challenge, the present study explores two key questions: (1) What types of speech acts can be developed within culturally grounded children's short story e-books? (2) How can these speech act-based dialogues be structured to enhance reading interest and comprehension?

Embedding local narratives into English e-books presents a promising avenue to reinforce learners' cultural familiarity and identity while simultaneously nurturing their intercultural competence and language development (Julia & Jeyanthi, 2024; Marek & Godfrey, 2024). Culturally responsive stories reflecting learners' lived experiences not only improve linguistic

proficiency but also promote empathy and narrative comprehension. Moreover, digital storytelling offers multimodal literacy opportunities that align with the screen-based habits of today's children, further enhancing their engagement and understanding**.** Key studies have demonstrated this value: Hafner and Ho (2020) show how digital multimodal composing strengthens second language learning; Yang, Chen, and Hung (2020) report that digital storytelling improves English speaking and creative thinking; and Rahimi and Yadollahi (2017) highlight literacy gains from both online and offline digital storytelling. Yet few studies integrate these insights with systematic speech act analysis in localized children's e-books.

Central to effective storytelling in children's literature is the use of dialogue, which drives plot and character development. These fictional exchanges often mimic pragmatic structures found in real-world communication. However, without adequate attention to speech acts—the communicative functions behind utterances—young readers may misinterpret character intent. For example, a question such as "Why is this classroom so dirty?" could function as a genuine inquiry or an indirect command, depending on the reader's pragmatic awareness. Because of these challenges, this study bridges speech act theory and culturally responsive pedagogy in digital storytelling, providing a new model for material development in EFL contexts.

Speech act theory, pioneered by Austin and elaborated by Searle, offers a valuable framework for understanding how language performs actions, including asserting, requesting, or promising (Ren, 2024; Salih & Othamn, 2024). This framework has increasingly informed applied linguistics and English Language Teaching (ELT), especially in the development of pragmatic competence among learners (Du, 2023). In educational contexts, it elucidates how teacher discourse and classroom interactions engage students through functionally meaningful communication (Zheng, 2024; Arifah et al., 2024). Applied to children's literature, it reveals how fictional dialogues can be vehicles for developing metapragmatic awareness in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings.

Searle's (1979) categorization of illocutionary acts—assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations—provides a comprehensive lens for analyzing dialogue in narrative fiction. Among these, directives and assertives are most prevalent in both educational materials and children's stories. However, designing dialogues that balance functional richness with cognitive accessibility for young learners remains a pedagogical challenge. In the context of digital e-books, incorporating culturally resonant and pragmatically explicit speech acts can scaffold learners' understanding of character roles and communicative goals.

The development of pragmatic awareness is now considered essential in communicative language teaching. Taguchi (2015) highlights that learners gain the most from exposure to dialogues embedded in naturalistic, context-rich scenarios. Empirical studies have corroborated the effectiveness of explicit speech act instruction in enhancing learners' abilities to interpret implied meanings and social cues (Du, 2023; Hung et al., 2023). Nonetheless, many EFL curricula still lack substantial emphasis on pragmatic instruction. Children's storybooks that intentionally embed diverse speech acts—especially those situated within familiar cultural contexts—can act as implicit yet powerful tools for cultivating this competence.

Furthermore, the social and cultural dimensions of dialogue cannot be overlooked. Genre-based pedagogy, grounded in Halliday's systemic functional linguistics, emphasizes how meaning is co-constructed through field, tenor, and mode (Tang et al., 2024). When applied to children's e-books, this framework necessitates the careful design of both content and form: stories must incorporate familiar cultural elements while modeling functional and context-appropriate language. This aligns with findings that culturally grounded materials foster learner motivation, comprehension, and identity alignment. Dialogic pedagogy, drawing on Bakhtinian theory, further underlines the importance of polyphonic character voices that mirror social interaction, enhancing learners' understanding of narrative dynamics.

Narrative pedagogy situates storytelling as a formative tool for both linguistic development and moral reasoning. Through well-crafted dialogue, children are able to interpret character motivations, infer intentions, and internalize societal norms. Conversely, poorly constructed dialogue—such as overly didactic or pragmatically inconsistent exchanges—risks disengaging readers or misrepresenting communicative intent. Recent studies advocate for explicit speech act integration in both story design and classroom use. For instance, Wang and Pan (2024) demonstrated that using intonation cues

p-ISSN 2301-7554, e-ISSN 2541-3643
Volume 13, Issue 3, October 2025

and labeling speech acts in audio-visual texts enhanced narrative comprehension. Likewise, Salih and Othamn (2024) found that re-annotating classical texts with speech act information improved learners' pragmatic interpretation.

Despite increasing interest in culturally embedded pedagogical materials, no known studies have systematically developed and evaluated speech act-based dialogues within English e-books grounded in Indonesian local cultures—particularly from the Sumbawanese context. This gap is critical, considering the dual importance of cultural relevance and pragmatic clarity in fostering effective English language learning among young learners.

METHOD

This study employed a Research and Development (R&D) design, adapting the well-established Borg and Gall (2003) model to suit the specific needs of English Language Teaching (ELT) material creation. R&D was chosen as it supports iterative refinement and practical classroom application, both crucial for the development of educational resources. Although the original model proposes ten stages, this research implemented six core phases that are commonly adopted in ELT-focused R&D frameworks: (1) needs analysis, (2) planning, (3) product development, (4) expert validation, (5) revision, and (6) final product testing (Pandey, 2024; Zhao, 2024). This streamlined version maintains methodological rigor while focusing on classroom relevance and pragmatic feasibility. Moreover, it aligns with growing calls for ecologically valid and context-sensitive approaches in second language acquisition research (He & Munos, 2025), facilitating the integration of both qualitative insights and quantitative evaluations to refine the e-book prototype.

Participants were purposefully selected to ensure expertise and contextual appropriateness. Four experienced English teachers participated in expert validation, alongside three language education specialists—two university lecturers and one pragmatics researcher—who contributed theoretical and pedagogical insights. In addition, twenty sixth-grade elementary school students from a public school in Sumbawa were involved as target users for testing the e-books. The selection of expert participants was based on their academic and professional backgrounds in ELT, children's literature, and speech act theory, ensuring relevance to the study's dual focus on pragmatics and local cultural grounding. The student participants were chosen based on their basic reading literacy and familiarity with digital devices, reflecting user profiles identified as suitable for digital ELT interventions (Bryfonski et al., 2024). Prior to participation, informed consent was obtained from all student participants and their guardians, ensuring ethical compliance and safeguarding participant rights throughout the study.

To collect data, the study employed a range of validated instruments designed to assess both linguistic and pedagogical quality. These included a speech act analysis rubric grounded in Searle's (1979) taxonomy, an expert validation sheet evaluating content, language use, cultural alignment, and educational suitability, and a student questionnaire measuring readability and interest. For example, the speech act rubric included items such as: "Identify whether the utterance is a directive, assertive, expressive, commissive, or declarative," and "Evaluate whether the speech act is contextually appropriate within the cultural frame of the story." One sample item from the student questionnaire was: "What did the character mean when they said 'Just buy me, I'm cheap'?" which was designed to assess the learner's understanding of the speaker's communicative intent in context.

The questionnaire was adapted from recent ELT materials development frameworks (Pandey, 2024). Additional data were gathered through classroom observation and researcher field notes during the trial phase. All instruments underwent face and content validation through expert review and pilot testing to ensure appropriateness and clarity.

The e-books were developed by embedding five dominant speech act types—assertives, directives, expressives, commissives, and declaratives—within the character dialogues. Cultural responsiveness was operationalized through the integration of Sumbawanese cultural elements such as local foods (e.g., Sepat), traditional practices (e.g., collective farming, ritual storytelling), and regional settings familiar to the children. These elements were embedded in both narrative events and character speech acts to affirm cultural identity while situating pragmatic functions in authentic contexts. Narrative construction drew upon principles of genre-based pedagogy and multimodal literacy to enhance comprehension and engagement (Mahdi, 2024; Zhao, 2024). During the revision phase, qualitative feedback from ELT and pragmatics

experts was used to refine the linguistic accuracy, speech act clarity, and cultural representation within the dialogues. Quantitative input was collected through a Likert-scale evaluation completed by teacher validators, focusing on the technical, linguistic, and pedagogical integrity of the product.

To ensure the methodological robustness of the study, both validity and reliability were carefully addressed. The expert validation rubric underwent peer review, with resulting suggestions incorporated to improve content validity. Interrater reliability for speech act identification was established through the independent coding of the e-book dialogues by two trained raters using Searle's classification system. The interrater reliability was calculated by dividing the number of coding agreements by the total number of coded speech acts, resulting in an 85% agreement rate. Readability and usability testing with student participants involved comprehension questions and a post-reading feedback form. These responses were analyzed to evaluate learner engagement, perceived relevance, and overall satisfaction with the e-books.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The present study was carried out in several structured phases as outlined below.

Research and information collection

Initial data collection revealed three key issues in the participants' story drafts: (i) some children's short stories lacked dialogue entirely, (ii) some novice authors were unable to differentiate between fictional dialogue and direct transcripts of everyday conversations, and (iii) the existing dialogues often failed to stimulate the reader's imagination due to weak character development and unclear moral messages.

Planning

To address these issues, a follow-up workshop on English children's story writing was conducted with 10 novice authors. The workshop emphasized two critical guidelines: (i) the inclusion of fictional dialogue was mandatory, and (ii) the dialogue should be capable of engaging the reader's imagination and emotional response.

As a result of this intervention, the 10 developed children's short story e-books contained a total of 115 locutionary acts. These were categorized into five types of illocutionary acts: 40 representative acts, 41 directive acts, 15 expressive acts, 17 commissive acts, and 2 declarative acts. As shown in Figure 1, representative and directive acts were the most frequently occurring, indicating a strong narrative and instructional focus within the dialogues.

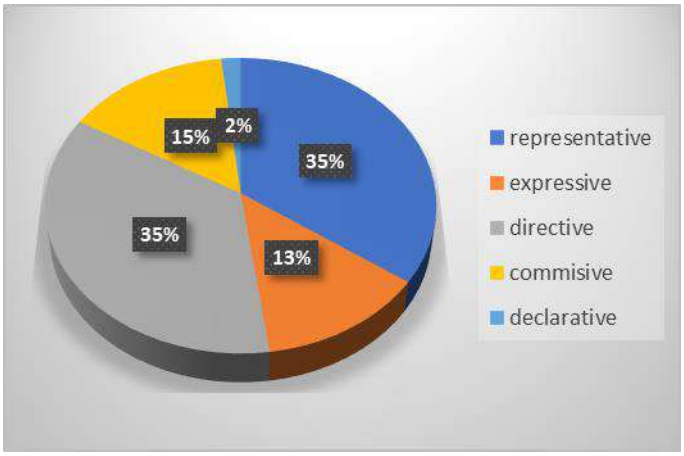


Figure 1. *Frequency distribution of illocutionary acts across the ten e-books*

Developing preliminary form of the product

Ten English-language children's stories were developed by 10 novice authors, who also served as the illustrators. Each manuscript was accompanied by original illustrations and centered on different themes, while maintaining relevance to Sumbawanese culture. The finalized drafts were formatted into PowerPoint presentations (PPTX) to facilitate their conversion into digital e-book format.

During this development phase, a pattern of monotony emerged in the representative illocutionary acts, particularly in the overuse of the "stating" and "complaining" forms. This indicated a limited ability among the writers to diversify dialogic structures within the representative category. Similarly, directive speech acts were found to rely heavily on "asking" and "requesting," revealing a narrow range of communicative functions.

p-ISSN 2301-7554, e-ISSN 2541-3643
Volume 13, Issue 3, October 2025

To address this issue, an additional round of training was conducted for the novice writers. The outcome was a more varied deployment of speech acts—especially within the representative and directive categories—which enhanced the functional richness and narrative dynamism of the e-books. To ensure accuracy in classification, two language experts were consulted to validate the forms and functions of the illocutionary acts as identified by the researchers.

Representative illocutionary acts

Representative speech acts were successfully expanded into six distinct functions: stating, asserting, concluding, complaining, deducing, and suggesting. As shown in Figure 2, the most commonly used function was "stating" (28%), followed by "complaining" (26%) and "concluding" (23%). This distribution suggests a developing ability among the writers to diversify narrative expression, although the predominance of certain forms still indicates room for greater variation.

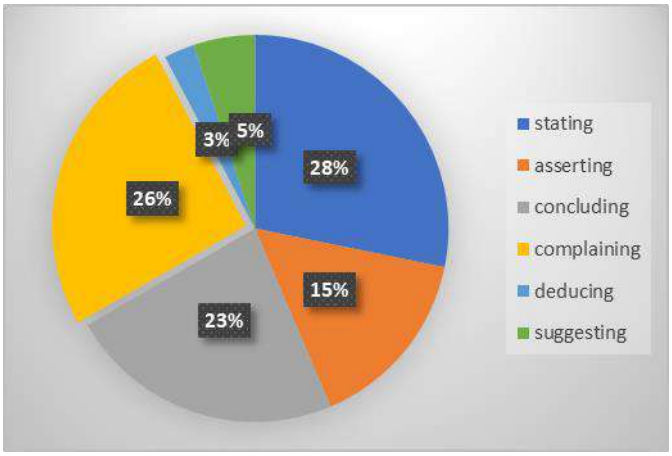


Figure 2. *Types of representative illocutionary acts used in the e-books*

Locutionary 1

> "It's even better to be you. Your meals are provided by your master. Your body gets stronger," Kokang responded.

This utterance appears in the children's short story e-book titled *"Samapi is Kokang's Buddy."* In this scene, Kokang—a snail—responds to a comment made by Samapi, a cow. While the surface structure of Samapi's earlier statement suggests envy, Kokang's reply reflects a shift in perspective. Initially perceived as a reciprocal expression of jealousy, Kokang's utterance evolves into a representative illocutionary act of asserting. The contextual clue lies in how Kokang reorients the conversation: instead of accepting Samapi's assumption of inferiority, Kokang asserts that Samapi's life is, in fact, more comfortable. He supports this by pointing out that Samapi receives daily meals and is growing stronger, suggesting that being cared for by a master offers more stability than the snail's self-sufficient but vulnerable lifestyle.

Locutionary 2

> "Didn't you get what you wanted?" concluded Kokang.

This statement, though phrased as a question, functions as a representative illocutionary act of concluding. It appears in a different section of the same story, where Kokang and Samapi have swapped places to explore new environments—Samapi in a rice field, and Kokang in a cowshed. Despite being structured as a negative interrogative; the utterance draws a conclusion that Samapi has obtained his desired outcome through the experience. However, the irony unfolds as it becomes clear that both characters still face challenges in their new habitats. The statement encapsulates a pragmatic blend of irony and insight, using a rhetorical form to assert a belief about Samapi's satisfaction—whether or not it aligns with reality.

Directive illocutionary acts: expanded range

Following revisions and training, the directive illocutionary acts were significantly expanded to reduce redundancy and enhance narrative interaction. The frequencies of each subtype across all e-books are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Kinds of directive illocutionary act developed*

Directive Subtype	Frequency (%)
Asking	23

Requesting	19
Advising	12
Ordering	9
Reminding	9
Begging	8
Promising	7
Offering	5
Inviting	3
Urging	2
Recommending	2

As shown in Table 1, the most commonly used directive acts are "asking," "requesting," and "advising," together accounting for over 50% of all directive utterances. These findings suggest a successful diversification effort, though the remaining types, particularly "urging" and "recommending," were used less frequently and could benefit from more strategic integration in future revisions. The broader distribution of directive functions enhances the authenticity and communicative richness of the dialogues, allowing characters to exhibit more dynamic social behaviors.

Locutionary 3

> "Why are vegetables like him here? The customers are getting sick of us," shouted the expensive carrot.

This dialogue appears in the short story *"The Bitter to be Finally Sought"*. Here, the character of the expensive carrot questions Pare's presence in the vegetable stall. While the sentence is phrased as an interrogative, its function is not to elicit an answer but to implicitly **invite** other vegetables to distance themselves from Pare. The intention is subtly reinforced by the subsequent statement, *"The customers are getting sick of us,"* which acts as a directive illocutionary act of reminding, intended to sway the others' attitudes toward Pare. Thus, the combined utterances suggest a layered communicative goal—to provoke exclusion under the guise of concern for customer perception.

Locutionary 4

> "Just buy me, I'm cheap," said Pare.

In the same story, the character Pare, portrayed as humble and self-aware, attempts to appeal to potential customers. This utterance reflects a directive illocutionary act of recommending. The phrase *"Just buy me"* directly promotes an action, while *"I'm cheap"* serves to justify and support that recommendation. Although the latter clause may superficially resemble a representative act (a factual statement), in this context, it is functionally persuasive and aims to influence decision-making. The redundancy of including both clauses, though perhaps stylistically simplistic, reinforces the pragmatic intent for young readers and aids in comprehension.

Preliminary field testing

Preliminary field testing was carried out to evaluate the initial version of the children's story e-books. This first round of testing was validated by two language experts, both of whom had experience in writing children's stories and illustrating picture books. Their dual expertise allowed for a more holistic evaluation of both linguistic appropriateness and visual-text coherence. Feedback from this phase informed targeted revisions to improve narrative clarity, speech act variety, and age-appropriate dialogue throughout the e-book content. The validation parameters and results are shown below.

Material validation

Table 2. *Result of validation*

No.	Aspect of Validation	Overall Percentage	Category
1	Correct use of grammar	82.5	very good
2	Use of appropriate dialogue quoting words	50	Not good
3	Appropriateness of age level with language style	50	Not good
4	Suitability of the title to the content of the story	75	very good
5	Interesting storyline and conflict	85	very good
6	Possess a clear moral message	82.5	very good
7	A visual representation aligned with the written text	87.5	very good
8	Strength of characters in the stories	85	very good

Based on the expert validation conducted by two professional linguists, it was found that among the ten English-language children's short stories, only two aspects required significant improvement. First, the use of appropriate dialogue quoting words was rated as inadequate in 50% of the stories. Second, language style appropriateness for the target age group also

p-ISSN 2301-7554, e-ISSN 2541-3643
Volume 13, Issue 3, October 2025

received a 50% "not good" rating. These issues suggested the need for clearer, more natural attribution in character speech and greater alignment between linguistic complexity and young readers' cognitive levels.

2) Dialogue Comprehension Test

A total of 20 participants were involved in the initial field testing phase. Each participant was asked to read one of the ten e-books of their choosing. After reading, they completed a structured questionnaire designed to assess their comprehension of dialogue, with a focus on identifying locutionary and illocutionary acts. The questionnaire was distributed via a closed system to ensure privacy and standardized response conditions. The data collected during this phase formed the basis for refining and revising the dialogue elements in the storybooks.

To supplement the questionnaire findings, semi-structured interviews were also conducted. These were intended to capture qualitative insights and uncover comprehension difficulties not revealed by the questionnaire. Additionally, a reading test was administered to evaluate participants' understanding of story content and character interaction, focusing on how well they could identify and interpret the pragmatic intentions embedded in the dialogue.

The results highlighted a notable comprehension gap in participants' ability to correctly interpret various types of speech acts. In particular, difficulties emerged in recognizing indirect speech acts. As shown in Table 3, question item no. 5, which assessed understanding of different forms of expression in dialogue, received a score of only 60%. This finding directly informed subsequent revisions aimed at clarifying illocutionary force and simplifying indirect language use.

Table 3. *Dialogue comprehension parameters – trial 1*

Comprehension Area	No of Item	Score (%)
Understanding story characters	34	85
Concluding moral messages	33	82.5
Understanding forms of expressions in dialogue	12	60

"I didn't really get what the characters meant. It was like they were hinting but not saying things clearly," said one student during the post-reading interview. This qualitative feedback highlights how indirect forms—though pragmatically authentic—often challenge young readers' interpretive skills, especially in an EFL context. Such responses supported the decision to replace ambiguous utterances with more direct and functionally transparent dialogue in the e-books' revised versions.

These results reinforced the importance of refining dialogue not only for grammatical accuracy and cultural relevance, but also for pragmatic clarity to support young readers' comprehension.

Main product revision

Based on insights from observations, questionnaires, interviews, and reading tests during the preliminary phase, the story dialogue scripts were revised. The updated versions of the stories were compiled as Product Revision 1, which incorporated both linguistic and pedagogical improvements.

Adaptation to linguistic validation aspects

Revisions were made in response to the two key issues identified in expert validation: (i) the use of appropriate dialogue quotation verbs, and (ii) the alignment of language style with the target age group. The following example illustrates these improvements:

Locutionary 5

> "Kokang, it's good to be you. You're free to bring your house everywhere," Samapi babbled.

In this version, the phrase *"You're free to bring your house everywhere"* was flagged for syntactic complexity, and the dialogue verb *"babbled"* was considered too abstract or informal for young readers. These issues were addressed by simplifying the structure and using a more familiar verb, resulting in: "Kokang, it's good to be you. You can take your house with you," Samapi said. This revision enhances clarity while maintaining the original meaning and emotional tone.

Avoiding indirect speech acts in children's dialogues

While indirect speech acts are common in natural communication, they can complicate comprehension for young learners. For children's literature, especially in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, the use of direct speech acts is recommended. As DuFon (2021) noted,

pragmatic appropriateness correlates with language proficiency; thus, simplifying the speech act structure can aid in comprehension and engagement.

Prior studies also support this position. Matsumura (2001) found that EFL learners predominantly use direct forms when giving advice or suggestions, whereas native speakers often employ indirect expressions. Similarly, Martínez (2005) observed that indirect acts typically rely on contextual signals—an approach less suitable for young readers, even when supported by illustrations.

Locutionary 11

> "We learned how to make nests from bees," said the black ant.

During interviews, some readers misinterpreted this utterance as suggesting that the black ants had already mastered nest-building, leading them to ask, *"Why don't the red ants just learn from the black ants?"* In fact, the author's intention was to communicate that the red ants should directly meet the bees, as the black ants had done. The indirect form obscured the commissive intent (i.e., a planned action). This illustrates the need to prioritize direct and unambiguous dialogue in children's stories to avoid misinterpretation.

Further, variations in modal usage (e.g., *should* vs. *might*) may alter the strength of a recommendation. Gu (2014) found that Chinese EFL learners tend to overuse strong modals like *should*, which may skew meaning and tone. Accordingly, storybook dialogues were revised to reflect appropriate modal use, helping balance pragmatic intent with learner comprehension. These adaptations help ensure that character voices remain authentic without exceeding readers' interpretive capacity.

Main field testing

Following the revisions, Main Field Testing (Trial 2) was conducted. All ten revised children's story e-books were redistributed to the same pool of 20 reader participants. Each participant selected a different story than the one they had previously read. Observations were conducted during reading sessions, and comprehension questionnaires were completed post-reading. Interviews were held when further clarification or insight was needed. A reading test was administered to assess the impact of dialogue revisions on story comprehension.

Dialogue comprehension test results

As shown in Table 4, scores improved across comprehension parameters after revisions were implemented. In particular, scores on dialogue form comprehension improved to 85% in the second trial, representing a 25 percentage point gain. The effect size (Cohen's d) for this improvement was 0.80, which is conventionally interpreted as large, indicating a meaningful enhancement in learners' comprehension of dialogue forms. Across comprehension parameters, gains ranged from +2.5% (moral message comprehension) to +25% (dialogue form comprehension), with an overall mean improvement of +11%. The increased scores in dialogue form comprehension, in particular, indicate that the move toward direct speech acts was beneficial for young EFL readers.

Table 4. *Dialogue Comprehension Parameters – Trial 2*

Comprehension Area	Question No.	Number of Correct Responses	Percentage (%)
Understanding story characters	Q1 & Q2	34	85%
Concluding moral messages	Q3 & Q4	33	82.5%
Understanding forms of dialogue	Q5	34	85%

These results confirm that the revised e-books effectively enhanced dialogue clarity and reader understanding. The increased scores in dialogue form comprehension, in particular, indicate that the move toward direct speech acts was beneficial for young EFL readers.

Demand for dialogue in key narrative moments

Among the ten children's short stories developed, two were found to have a significantly limited number of locutionary acts compared to the others. Specifically, the short story *"Pina in the Chilli Field"* contained only seven locutionary acts, primarily composed of directive and representative illocutionary functions. Similarly, *"The Regret in a Cage"* also included just seven locutionary acts, with a majority categorized as directive in nature.

Feedback gathered through participant interviews revealed a strong reader preference for

p-ISSN 2301-7554, e-ISSN 2541-3643
Volume 13, Issue 3, October 2025

additional dialogue, particularly during the conflict and climax phases of the stories. These narrative moments were perceived as pivotal for enhancing emotional engagement and narrative excitement. “When the birds got trapped, I wanted to hear what they said or shouted. It felt too quiet,” said one reader, expressing a sense of emotional disconnection in the absence of character dialogue during high-stakes scenes. This feedback revealed that silence in such climactic moments could disrupt the narrative flow and limit the reader’s empathetic engagement. As a result, subsequent revisions focused on embedding emotionally charged speech acts—particularly expressives and directives—within scenes of conflict or transformation to heighten drama and clarify character motivation.

This perception was further corroborated by questionnaire data, which indicated that many participants believed the middle sections of the stories—where the main conflicts often develop—should include more dialogue. Participants argued that such additions would not only deepen character interactions but also enrich the overall reading experience.



Figure 3. *Narrative passage before dialogue revision in 'The Regret in a Cage'*

An illustrative case comes from the story *“The Regret in a Cage”*. In one of the slides (Figure 3), a narrative passage (Narration 1) presented a detailed account of birds trapped in bamboo cages.

Narration 1

“The same thing happened to the other starlings. All the cages around the rice field were full of starlings that had entered the trap. Some of the starlings tried to get out but they got caught between the bamboo segments. Some had their feathers ripped off because they forced to fly in a cramped cage.”

During the interview phase, one participant suggested that inserting dialogue in this segment would enhance emotional resonance. They stated, *“It would be more exciting if the dialogue was added to this part,”* while pointing to the exact slide on their screen. This qualitative insight reinforces the earlier finding that the readers desired greater character interaction—particularly in emotionally or morally charged scenes.

These findings suggest that while the novice writers were able to incorporate a range of speech acts, the distribution across narrative stages was uneven. The frequent use of directive and representative acts tended to cluster at the beginning and end of stories, leaving middle sections—especially conflict and climax scenes—underdeveloped in terms of dialogue.

In response, the recommendation is to embed additional speech act-rich dialogue in these key narrative moments, ensuring that conflict and resolution are conveyed not only through narration but also through interactive, expressive, and emotionally driven character speech.

Operational product revision

Based on input gathered from interviews and questionnaires during previous testing phases, additional revisions were implemented to produce a second, improved version of the children’s short story e-books. These changes aimed to enhance narrative engagement, particularly in stories

previously identified as lacking sufficient dialogue.

Among the ten stories analyzed, two stood out due to their minimal use of locutionary acts. *"Pina in the Chilli Field"* contained only seven locutionary acts, most of which were categorized as directive and representative. Similarly, *"The Regret in a Cage"* included only seven locutionary expressions, predominantly directive in nature. By contrast, high-dialogue stories such as *"Samapi is Kokang's Buddy"* and *"The Bitter to be Finally Sought"* contained more than 15 locutionary acts each, including a richer variety of expressives and commissives. Questionnaire data confirmed that comprehension scores for high-dialogue stories were on average 12% higher than for low-dialogue stories, suggesting that the density and diversity of speech acts directly influenced narrative engagement and interpretive success.

In response, targeted revisions were made to insert dialogues in key narrative moments. One notable example of this improvement can be seen in the transformation of *Narration 1* from *"The Regret in a Cage"*. The original passage (Narration 1) provided only descriptive narration of the birds' entrapment.

Narration 1
"The same thing happened to the other starlings. All the cages around the rice field were full of starlings that had entered the trap. Some of the starlings tried to get out but they got caught between the bamboo segments. Some had their feathers ripped off because they forced to fly in a cramped cage."

In the revised version (*Narration 2*), dialogue was added to enhance dramatic tension and provide emotional depth.

Narration 2
"The same thing happened to the other starlings. All the cages around the rice field were full of starlings that had entered the trap. Some of the starlings tried to get out but they got caught between the bamboo segments. Some had their feathers ripped off because they forced to fly in a cramped cage."
'Why can't we get out from here?' asked one of them.
'We are trapped!'"

The addition of these two locutionary acts at the end of the narration significantly improved the narrative's emotional appeal. The first utterance, though framed as a question, carries a strong sense of panic, signaling a directive illocutionary act—a plea for help rather than a genuine request for information. The second utterance functions as a representative illocutionary act, with the speaker concluding their entrapment. These revised lines not only introduce new pragmatic functions but also fulfill the reader participants' expressed desire for more interactive and emotionally charged storytelling at critical narrative junctures. "*That part was finally interesting! It felt like I could hear the birds talking to each other*," one participant remarked during the second trial phase, indicating increased engagement and improved narrative clarity. This contrast between low-dialogue and high-dialogue stories underscores that embedding richer speech act exchanges during conflict and climax scenes not only strengthens emotional resonance but also yields measurable comprehension gains.

In sum, the second revision phase enriched the stories with well-placed dialogue, aligning narrative tension with pragmatic variation and reader engagement. These changes mark a pivotal step in elevating the overall quality of the children's story e-books and ensuring their effectiveness in fostering both language learning and imaginative involvement.

The present study offers meaningful contributions to the development of culturally responsive English e-books by demonstrating the applicability of speech act theory in crafting pragmatically rich and pedagogically effective narratives. Drawing on Searle's (1979) typology of illocutionary acts, the integration of speech acts within culturally grounded storytelling enabled the production of interactive, comprehensible, and affectively engaging texts for young EFL learners. The predominance of representative and directive acts across the ten stories aligns with previous research showing their prominence in early communicative development (Ren, 2024; Salih & Othamn, 2024). Yet, this study extends existing knowledge by illustrating how the careful placement of expressive and commissive speech acts can support emotional resonance and narrative coherence in localized ELT materials.

In particular, the findings resonate with Du's (2023) assertion that pragmatic competence should be foregrounded in EFL instruction through authentic and socially contextualized discourse. Du's experimental work on speech act instruction showed that learners who engaged with pragmatically enriched texts performed better on interpretation tasks than those exposed

p-ISSN 2301-7554, e-ISSN 2541-3643
Volume 13, Issue 3, October 2025

to traditional dialogues. Similarly, this study found that adding direct speech with identifiable illocutionary functions significantly enhanced comprehension and engagement among young readers. The feedback from student participants—especially their difficulty interpreting indirect acts—supports Du's observation that explicit and direct speech is often more accessible for EFL learners in the early stages of pragmatic development. This is further substantiated by the quantitative results, where comprehension of dialogue forms improved by 25 percentage points (Cohen's d = 0.80, large effect), and by the differentiated performance between high-dialogue and low-dialogue stories (a 12% mean difference), confirming that richer pragmatic density leads to stronger interpretive outcomes.

The present findings also contrast with Martínez-Flor's (2005) work on suggestions, which demonstrated that learners benefited from exposure to indirect and mitigated forms of speech in developing pragmatic sophistication. In contrast, our results highlight that for younger EFL learners in early literacy stages, highly explicit and direct speech acts facilitated better comprehension and engagement. This divergence suggests that developmental level and learner readiness are critical in determining the optimal balance between directness and indirectness in pedagogical materials.

The innovative dimension of this study lies in its combination of speech act theory with culturally responsive pedagogy in the development of children's digital literature. While previous research has explored either pragmatics in ELT or culturally responsive teaching independently (Julia & Jeyanthi, 2024; Marek & Godfrey, 2024), this study bridges both by embedding Sumbawanese cultural values and speech act-laden dialogue into e-books designed for beginner English readers. This fusion supports the learner's linguistic growth while affirming their cultural identity—a dual outcome that is rarely targeted in conventional materials development. It also contributes to a growing body of scholarship that emphasizes the role of culturally sustaining pedagogy in language learning (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Zhao, 2024).

Moreover, the use of speech act-informed dialogue contributed not only to functional language learning but also to narrative comprehension and emotional literacy. As seen in the students' reactions, especially to revised dialogue in "The Regret in a Cage," pragmatic clarification helped them infer character emotions, intentions, and story outcomes more accurately. This qualitative evidence complements the statistical results, reinforcing that carefully embedded speech acts can simultaneously scaffold comprehension and enrich the affective dimension of reading. This reinforces the notion that young learners benefit from dialogic scaffolding in narrative texts, an argument advanced by Taguchi (2015) and supported in this study through both quantitative results and interview feedback.

From a pedagogical perspective, this study underscores the need for ELT materials to balance pragmatic accessibility with cultural relevance. Teachers and materials developers should consider incorporating speech act awareness into both text design and instructional strategies. For instance, classroom storytelling sessions can highlight different illocutionary functions explicitly, allowing learners to practice interpreting speech beyond literal meaning. This may be especially valuable in Indonesian and other multilingual EFL settings, where learners often rely heavily on direct lexical meaning due to limited exposure to authentic English use.

Additionally, the results suggest that multimodal e-books serve as effective platforms for integrating culturally grounded and pragmatically nuanced content. As digital reading becomes more common among young learners, such materials can foster both early literacy and intercultural competence. However, successful implementation requires that teachers be trained not only in digital literacy, but also in recognizing and teaching speech acts in child-friendly ways—a relatively underdeveloped area in current ELT professional development.

While the study yields promising outcomes, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cultural grounding of the stories in the Sumbawanese context may limit their generalizability to learners from other regions or ethnic backgrounds. Second, the sample size, especially of student participants, was relatively small and region-specific. Larger and more diverse samples could yield richer insights into the effectiveness of speech act integration across contexts. Third, although effect sizes indicated strong gains, the lack of a control group limits the ability to definitively attribute improvements to the e-books alone. Fourth, the study did not examine long-term retention or transfer of pragmatic competence, so the durability of the observed gains remains uncertain.

Future research may explore how students from different cultural or linguistic backgrounds interpret speech acts in localized stories, or assess how such materials affect longer-term pragmatic development. Studies could also investigate the integration of audio or animated elements to further enhance pragmatic cues and emotional resonance in digital storytelling for language learners. Longitudinal designs and cross-cultural comparisons would provide further evidence for the scalability and sustainability of this approach.

CONCLUSION

This study developed culturally responsive English e-books for young EFL learners by integrating speech act theory into localized storytelling. Grounded in Searle's (1979) typology, the materials embedded assertives, directives, expressives, commissives, and declarations within dialogues drawn from Sumbawanese cultural contexts. The iterative Research and Development (R&D) process ensured both pedagogical validity and cultural authenticity, resulting in narratives that fostered greater comprehension, emotional engagement, and cultural identification among students.

Quantitative findings demonstrated significant gains in comprehension—most notably a 25 percentage point improvement in recognizing dialogue forms (Cohen's d = 0.80, large effect)—while qualitative data highlighted the importance of dialogic scaffolding for emotional resonance. Notably, high-dialogue stories consistently outperformed low-dialogue stories in comprehension by an average of 12%, underscoring the centrality of speech act density in narrative effectiveness. These outcomes affirm the dual role of speech acts in supporting both pragmatic competence and cultural learning.

The contribution of this study lies in demonstrating how culturally responsive pedagogy and speech act theory can be productively combined in digital storytelling for EFL contexts. Unlike prior research that has tended to isolate either pragmatic instruction or cultural responsiveness, this study bridges the two domains, illustrating that localized stories can both affirm learners' identities and scaffold their pragmatic awareness. This offers a practical model for ELT materials developers working in other multilingual and under-resourced contexts.

While the results are promising, certain limitations temper the generalizability of these findings. The relatively small, region-specific sample constrains the extent to which outcomes can be applied across diverse learner populations. Additionally, the absence of a control group and the lack of long-term tracking limit conclusions about the durability and causality of observed gain**s.** These limitations suggest caution in making broad claims, even as the results indicate strong potential for impact.

Future research should extend this work by conducting longitudinal studies to examine retention of pragmatic competence over time, as well as cross-cultural comparisons to determine the adaptability of speech act-informed, culturally grounded e-books in other contexts. Integrating multimodal features such as audio intonation and animated dialogue may also strengthen learners' ability to interpret indirectness and emotional nuance. Such studies would enrich understanding of how digital storytelling can advance both language acquisition and intercultural competence in young EFL learners.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was supported by the Directorate of Research and Community Service, Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology, through the 2024 Competitive Research Grant under the Affirmative Scheme for Early-Career Lecturers.

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