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Development of Big Books Based on Local Cultural Contexts to Promote English Learning among Early Childhood Learners: A Study of Teacher Participation

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Abstract. This study aimed to (1) develop Big Books grounded in the local cultural context of Nakhon Ratchasima Province, (2) examine the nature and quality of teacher participation in designing and creating these learning materials, and (3) investigate preschool children's usage behaviors and engagement in learning English through the developed storybooks. The study employed a qualitative classroom-based case study approach integrated with developmental practice. Key informants included 12 early childhood teachers and 48 preschool children drawn from two classrooms, selected through purposive sampling. Research instruments consisted of structured child behavior observation forms, semi-structured teacher interview forms, field notes, and artifact analysis forms for the developed storybooks. Data were analyzed through content analysis, triangulation, and descriptive synthesis. The findings revealed that teachers were able to develop Big Books integrating local cultural content, including Phimai Historical Park, Chumphon Gate, Thai silk, and Pad Mee Korat, with simple English vocabulary and sentence patterns appropriate for preschool children. They repeatedly revisited the books, retold stories from pictures, practiced English vocabulary pronunciation, and made meaningful connections between the stories and their real-life experiences. These findings suggest that teacher-created Big Books grounded in local cultural contexts can serve as powerful and meaningful instructional materials that simultaneously promote English language learning and foster a sense of local pride among early childhood learners.

Keywords: Big Books and local culture, early childhood English learning, teacher-created materials for preschool children

1. Introduction

In contemporary education, English language learning at the early childhood level has gained increasing importance, largely due to the expanding role of English as a global medium of communication and a gateway to knowledge across disciplines. Introducing children to English at an early age provides an important foundation for long-term language development, particularly during the preschool years when children demonstrate a remarkable natural capacity for language perception, imitation, and interaction-based learning (Cameron, 2001; Pinter, 2017; Shin & Crandall, 2014). Neurolinguistic research consistently indicates that the early childhood period represents a window of heightened neurological sensitivity to language input, during which meaningful and well-structured exposure can yield lasting benefits for literacy and communication throughout a learner's life (Sousa, 2017; Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2014).

However, it is essential to recognize that English learning for young children cannot and should not be approached in the same manner as formal language instruction designed for older learners or adults. Preschool children learn most effectively through play, storytelling, visual support, movement, and meaningful social interactions, rather than through decontextualized vocabulary memorization or structured grammar instruction (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Genesee, 2015). This developmental reality places a significant responsibility on educators and curriculum designers to ensure that instructional materials for this age group are not only linguistically appropriate but also emotionally engaging and closely connected to children's immediate lived experiences (Ellis & Brewster, 2014; Wright, 2013). Storybooks, in particular, are widely recognized as powerful vehicles for children's language learning because they embed language within meaningful narrative contexts populated by characters, events, and rich visual imagery. Story reading simultaneously develops listening comprehension, spoken language, emergent literacy awareness, and imaginative thinking. These skills are widely regarded as fundamental pillars of early language development (Isbell et al., 2004; Morrow, 2005; Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006). When language is encountered within a story, children do not merely receive isolated vocabulary items; instead, they encounter words and phrases embedded in purpose, emotion, and context, which significantly deepens retention and understanding.

Among the various story-based instructional formats available to early childhood educators, Big Books occupy a particularly prominent and well-established position. Their large format, highly visible illustrations, and structural suitability for shared reading make them especially appropriate for preschool classroom settings (Holdaway, 1979; Justice & Kaderavek, 2002). When a teacher reads aloud from a Big Book, children can simultaneously see the text and the images, allowing them to draw connections between visual and linguistic meaning in real time. This shared reading experience also invites active participation, as teachers can point to words and pictures, pose questions, encourage predictions, and scaffold story retelling, thereby promoting vocabulary development, comprehension, and engaged learning (Wasik & Hindman, 2020).

The theoretical foundations supporting this approach are robust. Whole language theory argues that children acquire language most naturally through holistic, meaningful, and integrated experiences (Cambourne, 1988; Goodman, 1986). These include activities such as storytelling, reading together, and purposeful communication. This approach prioritizes authentic engagement over the isolated drilling of individual language components. This perspective encourages educators to provide learners with rich, authentic language environments where meaning is always central and language is always purposeful. Complementing this, brain-based learning theory proposes that learning becomes more deeply encoded and more readily retrieved when instructional content is emotionally meaningful, connected to prior experience, and delivered through multiple sensory channels simultaneously (Jensen, 2008; Sousa, 2017; Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2014).

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The combination of visual illustration, oral narration, and tactile engagement that characterizes Big Book reading is thus strongly aligned with what neuroscience tells us about effective learning.

A further dimension that has attracted growing scholarly attention is the cultural relevance of instructional materials. Leading scholars argue that learning is most meaningful and equitable when instruction reflects students' lives (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2017). To achieve this, educational content must honor learners' cultural backgrounds, social identities, and everyday lived experiences. For young children, especially, stories centered around familiar places, foods, festivals, and community practices are far more likely to foster genuine understanding, emotional connection, and intrinsic motivation than instructional materials that present a culturally foreign or abstract world. This argument is not merely philosophical; a substantial body of empirical evidence suggests that culturally grounded instruction produces measurable improvements in student engagement, comprehension, and retention (Gay, 2018).

Integration of Big Books and Local Cultural Contexts in Early Childhood Education. The use of Big Books in early childhood education relies profoundly on the principles of shared reading (Holdaway, 1979), which provides a foundation for emergent literacy. The enlarged text and rich illustrations allow young learners to participate collaboratively in the reading process, scaffolding their understanding. When these materials are contextualized within the learners' local culture, their effectiveness is greatly enhanced. Culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018) and the incorporation of students' "funds of knowledge" suggest that integrating familiar local elements into English language learning materials significantly lowers the affective filter. Preschool children benefit greatly when English storybooks reflect their daily realities, such as local landmarks or traditional foods. This connection bridges the gap between their real-world knowledge and new second-language vocabulary, making the learning process highly meaningful.

Teacher Collaborative Professional Development in Material Design. Furthermore, the quality of such instructional materials is deeply tied to the teachers who create them. Literature on teacher professional development emphasizes the importance of collaborative, bottom-up approaches (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). When teachers actively participate in designing and creating learning materials, rather than simply consuming pre-packaged resources, they develop a stronger sense of professional agency and pedagogical content knowledge. This collaborative design process allows teachers to align instructional materials with the developmental needs and cultural backgrounds of their student populations, ultimately elevating overall instructional quality.

Preschool Children's Engagement with Literacy Materials Lastly, understanding how preschool children interact with these materials is crucial. Research on child engagement during shared book reading highlights multiple dimensions: behavioral (e.g., physical interaction with the book, eye contact), cognitive (e.g., responding to questions, recalling vocabulary), and emotional (e.g., displaying enjoyment) (Justice & Kaderavek, 2002; Mol et al., 2008). Previous studies indicate that English storybooks that balance linguistic simplicity with visually and culturally stimulating content encourage spontaneous usage behaviors, such as independent revisiting of the books during free play and voluntary verbal repetition of target vocabulary.

Nakhon Ratchasima Province, located in Thailand's northeastern region, offers an exceptionally rich array of cultural resources that could serve as compelling, locally meaningful content for early childhood instructional materials. Prominent cultural landmarks and traditions include the ancient Phimai Historical Park, the historic Chumphon Gate, the celebrated Thai silk-weaving tradition, and the iconic local dish Pad Mee Korat. These cultural elements are deeply familiar to children and families in the area and could serve as engaging, personally resonant foundations for the development of Big Books written in simple English. Such materials hold the potential not only to support

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English language learning but also to strengthen children's sense of pride in and connection to their local cultural heritage. Beyond the question of material quality, the process by which instructional materials are developed is itself an important consideration. Engaging teachers directly in the design and creation of classroom materials constitutes a meaningful and practitioner-centered form of professional development. Teachers who actively develop their own materials are more likely to gain a nuanced understanding of their learners' needs, to adapt content to the practical realities of their classrooms, and to implement instructional strategies with greater confidence and intentionality (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Richards, 2017). Teacher authorship of materials also fosters a sense of ownership and investment in outcomes that externally produced materials rarely achieve.

For all of these reasons, this study was designed to investigate the development of Big Books based on local cultural contexts as a means of promoting English learning among preschool children, with a particular focus on teacher participation in the development process, the characteristics of the resulting materials, and children's behavioral responses and engagement during classroom implementation.

2. Objectives of the Study

The study was guided by four overarching research objectives. The first was to develop Big Books grounded in local cultural contexts to promote English language learning among early childhood learners. The second was to examine the nature and quality of teacher participation in the design and creation of the Big Book storybooks. The third was to investigate preschool children's usage behaviors and responses toward the developed Big Books during classroom activities. The fourth was to synthesize the broader potential of local culture-based Big Books as a tool for promoting English learning among preschool children.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative classroom-based case study approach integrated with developmental practice. This design was selected because it is particularly well-suited to examining complex processes of material development, collaborative teacher participation, and children's engagement within authentic classroom contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A case study design allows the researcher to preserve the rich contextual detail that quantitative approaches often lose, thereby producing findings that are deeply descriptive and interpretively meaningful. The integration of developmental practice further ensured that the research process itself contributed to the creation of tangible instructional products, rather than merely observing existing practices from a distance.

3.2 Participants

The key informants in this study consisted of two distinct groups. The first group comprised 12 early childhood teachers who participated in the material development workshops and subsequent classroom implementation. The second group consisted of 48 preschool children from two classrooms (24 per classroom) who were observed during Big Book reading and free-choice activities. All participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in the material development project and its classroom implementation, thereby ensuring that the data sources were both relevant and rich in information (Patton, 2015).

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3.3 Research Instruments

Structured Child Behavior Observation Forms. The Structured Child Behavior Observation Form was developed based on the multidimensional framework of student engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004), specifically focusing on behavioral and affective engagement during shared reading activities. The instrument was designed to capture specific, observable indicators of children's interaction with the Big Books. Targeted behaviors included:(1) visual tracking and focused attention during storytime; (2) verbal responses, such as spontaneous repetition of English vocabulary and answering teacher prompts; (3) physical gestures, such as pointing to illustrations to make meaning; and (4) independent usage, particularly whether children voluntarily chose to read the Big Books during free-choice periods. Observation Procedures: Observations were conducted by the researchers and co-teachers twice a week over a 4-week implementation period. Each observation session lasted approximately 15-20 minutes, covering both structured shared reading times and unstructured free-play periods. The data collected from the forms were analyzed using descriptive frequency counts of recurring behaviors and qualitative thematic analysis to identify patterns in engagement, directly addressing the research objective regarding children's usage behaviors.

Semi-Structured Teacher Interview Forms: To explore teachers' experiences and the impact of the collaborative design process, These Forms were used. This instrument was designed to elicit in-depth, reflective qualitative data from the participating teachers post-implementation. The interview covered pedagogical challenges, cultural integration, and professional growth. Representative examples of the interview questions included:

"How did you incorporate the local cultural context of Nakhon Ratchasima Province into the design and content of the Big Books?"

"What challenges did you encounter during the process of developing the Big Books, and how did you address them?"

"How did you observe and assess preschool children's engagement and responses when using the developed Big Books during English learning activities?"

"What aspects of the Big Books development process did you find most meaningful and valuable for your professional development as a teacher?"

3.4 Research Procedures

The study unfolded across four sequential and interrelated stages. In the first stage, teachers participated in a series of professional development workshops focused on the principles of Big Book design and evidence-based approaches to English learning for young children. In the second stage, teachers collaboratively designed story narratives grounded in the local cultural content of Nakhon Ratchasima Province. In the third stage, teachers produced the physical Big Books using hand-drawn illustrations, simple English text, and, in some cases, real tactile materials such as silk fabric samples. In the fourth and final stage, the developed books were implemented in preschool classrooms, where children's engagement and behavioral responses were systematically observed.

3.5 Data Collection

Data were collected through multiple complementary methods throughout the material development and classroom implementation stages. Classroom observations were conducted during structured Big Book reading sessions and free-choice periods. Teacher interviews were conducted following the workshops and again after classroom implementation to capture both immediate and reflective responses. Field notes were recorded continuously across all stages to document emergent observations. Artifact analysis of the completed Big Books was conducted to examine their structural, linguistic, and cultural characteristics.

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3.6 Data Analysis

Data were subjected to qualitative content analysis, through which major categories were identified, coded, and synthesized into coherent themes related to teacher participation, material characteristics, child engagement, and learning potential (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Trustworthiness was enhanced through triangulation of data sources, methods, and interpretive perspectives, in accordance with the criteria established by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Member checking with teacher participants was also employed to verify the accuracy of interview interpretations and to strengthen the credibility of the findings.

4. Findings

4.1 Teacher Development Following the workshop series, teachers demonstrated substantially improved understanding of Big Book design principles and the application of age-appropriate English language use in early childhood instructional contexts. The average post-workshop assessment score was 18.50, reflecting meaningful knowledge and skill gains across the group. Qualitative interview data further revealed that teachers reported increased confidence in planning and delivering English learning activities, as well as a stronger sense of professional agency in creating materials.

As one teacher expressed during the post-implementation interview: "At first, I was worried about teaching English. But creating a story about Pad Mee Korat made it feel natural. Working together with other teachers allowed us to share ideas on how to keep the English sentences simple but highly engaging for our kids" (Teacher Interview, Participant 3).

The collaborative nature of the workshops was consistently highlighted as a key factor supporting these gains, as teachers described learning significantly from one another's perspectives, creative ideas, and classroom experience.

Table 1. Teacher Development Outcomes Following Workshop Participation

Item	Findings
Number of teachers	12
Workshop sessions	4
Duration per session	1 hour 30 minutes
Average post-workshop score	18.50
Key improvement area	Understanding of Big Book design principles and simple English use

4.2 Developed Big Books

As an outcome of the collaborative design and production process, the teacher group developed four original Big Book titles, each grounded in a distinct element of Nakhon Ratchasima's local cultural heritage. Each book was designed with large, vivid illustrations, short, repetitive English text, and culturally familiar content to maximize accessibility and engagement for preschool-aged children.

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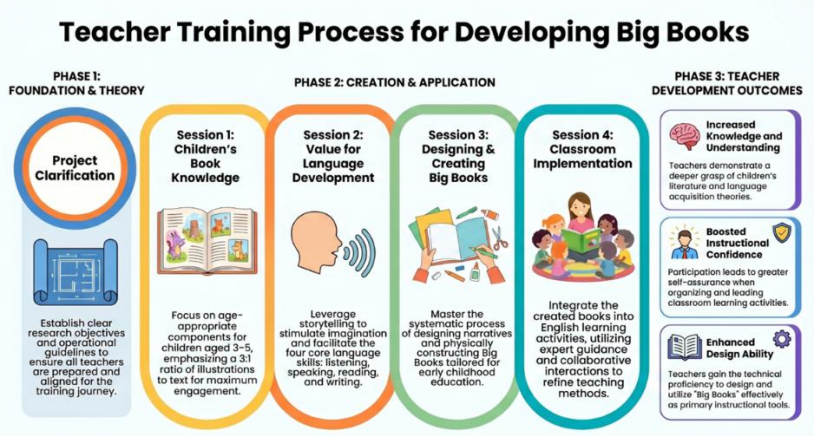


Figure 1. Teacher Training Process for Developing Big Book

Table 2. Characteristics of the Four Developed Big Book Titles

Title	Local Cultural Content	Key Vocabulary	Distinctive Feature
Manee Goes to Phimai	Phimai Historical Park	temple, go, beautiful	Large illustrative visuals
Manee Visits Chumphon Gate	Chumphon Gate	gate, city, walk	Short and simple text structure
Manee Cooks Pad Mee Korat	Pad Mee Korat	noodle,cook, yummy	Highly familiar cultural content
Manee and the Beautiful Silk Dress	Thai silk weaving tradition	silk, dress, soft	Inclusion of real silk material sample



Figure 2. Example Big Book

4.3 Children's Engagement Observation data revealed that preschool children consistently showed strong interest in and active engagement with the Big Books during both structured reading sessions and self-directed free-choice periods. Children maintained focused attention during story reading, responded enthusiastically to teacher questions, pointed to illustrations to make meaning, practiced pronouncing English vocabulary items, and spontaneously repeated short sentences from the stories.

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For instance, a field note captured during a free-choice period illustrated this engagement: "Three students voluntarily gathered around 'Manee Goes to Phimai'. One child pointed to the temple illustration and excitedly said, 'Phimai! Beautiful!', prompting the others to nod and repeat the English word" (Observation Note, Classroom A).

The children's high level of intrinsic motivation was significantly driven by the alignment of the Big Book explicitly with their lived experiences. According to teacher interviews, The *Pad Mee Korat* story closely connects with the Nakhon Ratchasima provincial slogan and is already integrated into the school's "I Love Korat" curriculum unit. Culturally responsive teaching deliberately and respectfully draws on learners' cultural knowledge, identities, and community contexts. As Gay (2018) and Ladson-Billings (1995) strongly argue, this approach produces measurable improvements in both academic achievement and student motivation. For instance, following a reading session, the children spontaneously initiated a plan to cook *Pad Mee* the next day, voluntarily assigning themselves to bring various ingredients from home. This demonstrates how culturally relevant materials can transform passive reading into active, experiential learning.

Notably, multiple children chose to revisit the Big Books independently during free-choice time, an indicator of intrinsic motivation and genuine enjoyment. Children also demonstrated meaningful comprehension by connecting story content to their own lived experiences, making comments such as recognizing local landmarks or describing personal encounters with featured foods.

Table 3. Observed Child Engagement Behaviors During Big Book Activities

Behavioral Dimension	Observed Behavior
Attention	Sustained focus on story reading and illustrations
Active participation	Answered teacher questions and pointed to pictures
Language use	Pronounced vocabulary items and repeated short sentences
Repeated self-directed use	Voluntarily revisited books during free-choice periods
Meaning-making	Connected story content to personal real-life experiences

4.4 Potential of the Developed Big Books

Synthesizing evidence across all data sources, the study identified four major dimensions of potential through which the developed Big Books promoted learning and well-being among the preschool participants. These dimensions spanned language development, contextual meaning-making, sustained behavioral engagement, and cultural identity formation. Specifically, regarding language development, claims of improved vocabulary recall were firmly grounded in observational evidence. Field records documented numerous instances where children spontaneously used target vocabulary days after the reading sessions. One brief field note highlighted: "During the lunch break, a child pointed to her noodles and proudly announced to her friends, 'Yummy noodle!', directly recalling the vocabulary from the Pad Mee Korat storybook" (Field Record, Week 4). This concrete connection illustrates how emotionally resonant, culturally familiar contexts facilitate lasting vocabulary retention.

Table 4. Synthesized Dimensions of Potential of the Local Culture-Based Big Books

Dimension	Identified Potential
Language development	Improved vocabulary recall and increased oral participation
Contextual meaning	Deeper comprehension facilitated by culturally familiar contexts
Behavioral engagement	Sustained attention and voluntary repeated use of materials
Cultural identity	Enhanced awareness of and pride in local cultural heritage

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Regarding language development, claims of improved vocabulary recall were strongly supported by observational data during follow-up activities. Capitalizing on the children's interest in the *Pad Mee Korat* story, teachers organized a real-life cooking activity. Before cooking, teachers prompted the children to introduce the ingredients in English. Observation field notes recorded that the majority of the children correctly recalled and pronounced target vocabulary, such as *pork*, *noodle*, *garlic*, and *sauce*, and could sequence the cooking steps. One teacher's field reflection highlighted this rapid retention: "A child enthusiastically told me, 'I remember these words easily because I love eating Pad Mee Korat." Furthermore, during a subsequent school exhibition, children spontaneously identified real ingredients using their newly acquired English vocabulary. This evidence clearly illustrates that when target language is embedded in meaningful, culturally resonant, and multi-sensory experiences, young learners can internalize and recall vocabulary with remarkable efficiency.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study offer meaningful insights into the relationship between culturally grounded instructional materials, early childhood English language learning, and teacher professional development. Taken together, the results support and extend a well-established body of theoretical and empirical literature from multiple intersecting fields.

The strong engagement and language-use behaviors observed among preschool children are consistent with foundational principles in early childhood language acquisition research. Cameron (2001) and Pinter (2017) have both argued that young learners respond most powerfully to language input embedded in meaningful, narrative, and visually supported contexts, precisely the characteristics that define the Big Books developed in this study. The large format of the books, combined with vivid hand-drawn illustrations, short, repetitive text, and familiar cultural content, created a developmental environment that was both appropriate and emotionally resonant for the children involved. These material characteristics directly addressed the cognitive and affective needs of learners at this developmental stage, which likely accounts for the high levels of sustained attention and voluntary re-engagement observed.

The findings also align closely with whole language theory, which holds that children acquire language most naturally when they encounter it as a purposeful, integrated, and meaning-centered activity rather than as a series of decontextualized drills (Cambourne, 1988; Goodman, 1986). The children in this study did not learn English vocabulary in isolation; rather, they encountered new words and sentence patterns within the narrative arc of familiar stories about recognizable places, foods, and community traditions. This contextual embedding gave the language personal relevance and emotional significance, both of which are widely understood to enhance retention and meaningful use (Jensen, 2008; Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2014).

The repeated reading behaviors and spontaneous story retelling observed among the children further corroborate research demonstrating the particular efficacy of shared and repeated reading as a pedagogical approach. Mol et al. (2008) conducted a comprehensive meta-analysis demonstrating that interactive shared reading significantly and consistently improves young children's vocabulary development and language comprehension when compared to non-interactive reading. Wasik and Hindman (2020) similarly documented the benefits of repeated shared reading for emergent literacy and vocabulary consolidation. The willingness of children in this study to return to the Big Books during unstructured free-choice time suggests that the materials generated intrinsic motivation that extended well beyond the formal instructional context.

The cultural grounding of the materials is another dimension that deserves careful consideration. Culturally responsive teaching deliberately and respectfully draws on

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learners' cultural knowledge, identities, and community contexts. As Gay (2018) and Ladson-Billings (1995) strongly argue, this approach produces measurable improvements in both academic achievement and student motivation. Paris and Alim (2017) have further extended this argument by advocating a culturally sustaining pedagogy that not only responds to existing cultural knowledge but also actively seeks to maintain and affirm it. The inclusion of Phimai Historical Park, Chumphon Gate, Thai silk, and Pad Mee Korat in the storybooks exemplifies exactly this kind of culturally sustaining orientation. Rather than presenting children with a culturally neutral or externally defined representation of the world, the Big Books situated English language learning within the children's own cultural landscape, thereby affirming their identities as members of a community with a distinctive and valued heritage.

The professional development dimension of the findings is equally significant and deserves explicit acknowledgment. The collaborative design process did more than just produce four storybooks. It was genuinely transformative for the teachers involved, boosting their professional confidence and deepening their pedagogical understanding. This finding is consistent with Darling-Hammond et al. (2017), who have identified teacher-led material development as one of the most effective and authentic forms of professional learning, precisely because it connects theoretical knowledge to practical action within real classroom contexts. Richards (2017) similarly notes that teachers who create their own materials develop a deeper, more nuanced understanding of their learners' needs than those who rely exclusively on externally produced resources. The collaborative nature of the workshops in this study added a further layer of professional benefit, as teachers described the experience of learning from and with colleagues as both intellectually stimulating and professionally affirming.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has demonstrated that teacher-created Big Books grounded in local cultural contexts can effectively support English language learning among preschool children while simultaneously contributing to teachers' professional growth and children's developing sense of cultural identity and pride. This study developed four Big Books, each focusing on a distinctive element of Nakhon Ratchasima's cultural heritage. The books successfully combined simple English vocabulary and sentence patterns with culturally familiar, emotionally resonant content. As a result, the materials were both linguistically accessible and deeply engaging for young learners. Children's sustained attention, voluntary re-engagement, enthusiastic participation, and meaningful connections between story content and personal experience collectively affirm the value of this approach as both a language learning strategy and a means of fostering cultural belonging in early childhood settings.

Based on these findings, several practical recommendations are offered for educators, school administrators, and policymakers working in early childhood and English language education. Schools and educational institutions are encouraged to actively support teachers in designing and developing their own context-based learning materials by providing dedicated professional development time, collaborative planning opportunities, and access to necessary production resources. Once developed, Big Books should be produced in sufficient quantities to allow simultaneous classroom use and independent child access during free-choice periods. The use of Big Books should also be integrated into broader literacy and language frameworks that include complementary follow-up activities such as collaborative storytelling, English vocabulary games, guided role-plays, and creative arts projects inspired by the storybook content.

Future research in this area might productively examine the long-term effects of sustained exposure to local culture-based Big Books on children's English vocabulary retention, emergent literacy development, and cultural identity formation. Comparative

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studies examining the relative effectiveness of Big Books versus other instructional media formats in early childhood English learning would also contribute valuable knowledge to the field. Additionally, replication studies conducted in other culturally distinct regions of Thailand and across different national contexts would help to determine the generalizability and adaptability of this approach beyond the specific setting of Nakhon Ratchasima Province.

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