



Implementing Culturally Responsive Teaching to Improve Students Engagement and Comprehension in Learning Recount Texts

¹Agnes Rosalyn Siahaan , ²Lis Supiatman , ³Nazla Rakhmi Lubis 

¹Universitas Asahan, INDONESIA

¹Kisaran, Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

²Universitas Asahan, INDONESIA

²Kisaran, Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

³SMA Negeri 3 Kisaran, INDONESIA

³Kisaran, Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This classroom action research aimed to investigate the effectiveness of implementing Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) to improve student engagement and comprehension in learning recount texts. The study was conducted with 36 tenth-grade students at SMA Negeri 3 Kisaran during the 2024/2025 academic year. Using the Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) model, the research was carried out in two cycles comprising planning, action, observation, and reflection phases. Data were collected through student engagement questionnaires, comprehension tests, observation sheets, and documentation. The results showed significant improvements: student engagement increased from 52.5% in the pre-cycle to 91% in Cycle II, and the percentage of students achieving the minimum passing score rose from 30% to 92%. Observations and documentation confirmed increased participation, motivation, and writing quality. The findings indicate that CRT is an effective pedagogical approach for enhancing engagement and academic achievement by making learning more culturally relevant and inclusive.

Correspondence:

Agnes Rosalyn Siahaan

agnesiahaan11@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

In the realm of language education, fostering student engagement and comprehension remains a paramount goal. Recount texts, which involve narrating past events, are a fundamental component of language curricula, yet they often pose significant challenges for students. This difficulty can stem from various factors, including struggles with idea generation, sentence construction, and a perceived lack of relevance of the topic to their daily lives. Such challenges can lead to a drastic decline in student motivation and a less effective learning process. Apoko et al. (2023) emphasized that low student motivation, particularly in reading recount texts, often stems from a lack of perceived relevance and insufficient language competence, which significantly impairs learning outcomes.

Traditional teaching approaches may sometimes overlook the diverse backgrounds and prior knowledge of students, leading to disengagement, particularly when students find the subject matter disconnected from their own experiences. When students perceive a disconnect between the curriculum and their personal or cultural contexts, their intrinsic motivation to learn can diminish, impacting their overall academic performance. Rahaman (2024) found that when culturally irrelevant materials were used, students tended to disengage from classroom activities and displayed minimal interest in language tasks, indicating that relevance is key to maintaining motivation and engagement.

To address these pedagogical challenges and enhance learning outcomes, innovative teaching methodologies are imperative. One such promising approach is Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). CRT emphasizes connecting academic content with students' cultural backgrounds, experiences, and living environments, thereby making learning more meaningful and relevant. According to Sukmawati et al. (2024), CRT enables teachers to create inclusive environments by incorporating students' cultural identities into instructional practices, resulting in improved student participation, confidence, and comprehension.

By integrating students' personal stories and local narratives, educators can transform abstract concepts into relatable and engaging learning experiences. This approach has been shown to significantly boost student motivation and involvement by validating their cultural identities and personal experiences as valuable learning resources. A study by the Iowa Reading Research Center (Will, 2022) concluded that students were more engaged and motivated when reading culturally relevant texts that reflected their own lives, which not only improved reading comprehension but also reinforced students'

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identities as competent learners.

This study aims to investigate the implementation of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) as a pedagogical solution to improve student engagement and understanding of recount texts. Specifically, it will focus on its application with tenth-grade students at SMA Negeri 3 Kisaran, where observations have indicated that students face difficulties in organizing ideas and constructing sentences for recount texts, compounded by a lack of perceived relevance of the topic. By exploring how CRT, through strategies such as brainstorming with local imagery and facilitating oral storytelling of personal and local experiences, can make the learning process more dynamic and effective, this research seeks to provide insights into fostering a more inclusive and effective learning environment for language acquisition. A recent experimental study by REL Southeast (2020s) showed that culturally responsive reading strategies, including storytelling, cooperative learning, and the use of locally relevant texts can substantially improve vocabulary retention, idea development, and students' ability to recount events both orally and in writing.

METHOD

This study employed a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design to improve students' engagement and understanding of recount texts through the implementation of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). The participants of this study were 36 tenth-grade students from SMA Negeri 3 Kisaran during the 2024/2025 academic year. CAR was selected due to its practical and reflective nature, enabling teachers to diagnose problems and implement instructional improvements in a cyclical manner.

The research followed the Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) model, which consists of four stages: planning, action, observation, and reflection. The study was conducted in two cycles, with each cycle comprising two meetings. In the planning stage, lesson plans were designed to incorporate CRT strategies, including the use of culturally relevant materials, personal storytelling, and collaborative group discussions rooted in students' local experiences and identities.

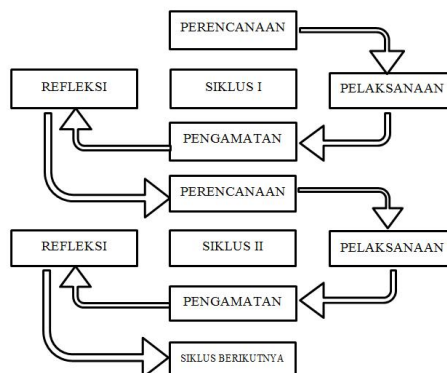


Figure 1: Classroom Action Research Flow (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988)

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The indicators of success in this research are increased engagement of X-I grade students at SMA Negeri 3 Kisaran in learning recount text and improved understanding of the material, which were observed through action cycles. Data was collected using several instruments:

- Student Engagement Questionnaire: Measures the level of student enthusiasm and participation in the learning process. The Likert scale was used to measure this psychological aspect (Komarudin & Sarkadi, 2017).
- Recount Text Comprehension Test: Evaluates students' understanding of the generic structure, language features, and content of recount text.
- Observation Sheet: Records student behavior and classroom dynamics during CRT implementation.
- Documentation: Collects student learning artifacts and field notes.

The questionnaire results were analyzed quantitatively using percentage index calculations, with the following formula:

$$\text{Index (\%)} = \frac{\text{Maximum Score}}{\text{Total Score}} \times 100\%$$

Assessment Intervals for student engagement:

Index 0% – 20% : Very Low

Index 21% – 40% : Low

Index 41% – 60% : Sufficient

Index 61% – 80% : High

Index 81% – 100% : Very High

For the comprehension test, the minimum completeness criterion (KKM) was set at 75. Students were considered complete if their score reached or exceeded the KKM.

FINDINGS

This research was conducted in two cycles, following the phases of planning, action implementation, observation, evaluation, and reflection.

Pre-Cycle Assessment

Before the first cycle began, the researchers conducted an initial assessment to measure the level of student engagement and their understanding of recount text. The initial assessment of student engagement was carried out through a questionnaire, and the results are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Pre-Cycle Engagement Analysis

Engagement Indicator	Index (%)	Assessment Interval
Attention	60%	Sufficient

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Active Participation	45%	Sufficient
Learning Motivation	50%	Sufficient
Material Relevance	55%	Sufficient
Average	52.5%	Sufficient

Table 1 shows that the average student engagement before implementing Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) was 52.5%, categorized as “Sufficient.” The highest score was in attention (60%), while the lowest was in active participation (45%). Learning motivation (50%) and material relevance (55%) were also relatively low. These results suggest that students were not fully engaged and that the existing teaching approach did not meet their needs or reflect their cultural backgrounds. Therefore, CRT is needed to make learning more relevant, inclusive, and engaging.

Furthermore, the results of the recount text comprehension test in the pre-cycle showed that only 30% of students achieved the KKM (75). This indicates that most students still had an inadequate understanding of the recount text material.

Cycle I

Based on the pre-cycle findings, the researchers planned and implemented actions in Cycle I by applying the Culturally Responsive Teaching approach. Learning was designed to integrate students' local cultural context into activities of reading, writing, and speaking about recount text. For example, students were asked to recount personal experiences relevant to their culture or analyze recount texts that featured local folklore.

After the implementation of Cycle I, the student engagement questionnaire and recount text comprehension test were administered again. The results are shown in Table 2 and Table 3.

Table 2. Cycle I Engagement Analysis

Engagement Indicator	Index (%)	Assessment Interval
Attention	78%	High
Active Participation	70%	High
Learning Motivation	75%	High
Material Relevance	80%	High
Average	75.75%	High

The results in Cycle I show a clear improvement in all engagement indicators. Attention increased to 78%, while active participation rose to 70%, indicating that students were more focused and involved in class activities. Learning motivation reached 75%, and material relevance scored the highest at 80%, suggesting that students found the content more meaningful and connected to their lives and culture.

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These results demonstrate the positive impact of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), which made learning more inclusive and personally relevant. The average engagement score increased significantly from 52.5% to 75.75%, moving into the “High” category. This significant increase from the pre-cycle score of 52.5% confirms the positive impact of implementing culturally responsive strategies. The results indicate that students are more engaged when learning connects with their identities, backgrounds, and experiences. The data in Table 2 supports the continuation of CRT-based strategies into the next cycle, with further refinements aimed at sustaining and deepening engagement, particularly by offering more opportunities for personal expression and collaborative learning grounded in students’ own cultures.

Table 3. Cycle I Recount Text Comprehension Test Results

Category	Number of Students	Percentage (%)
Complete	22	61%
Not Complete	14	39%

In Cycle I, the percentage of students who achieved KKM increased to 61%. Although there was an increase, there were still students who did not reach KKM, indicating the need for further improvement in the next cycle.

Cycle II

Based on reflections from Cycle I, the researchers made adjustments to the CRT implementation strategy. The focus in Cycle II was to deepen the cultural connection with the material, provide more scaffolding, and encourage student collaboration. Examples of adjustments included using visual learning media richer in local cultural elements, and assigning collaborative recount text writing tasks that addressed socio-cultural themes close to the students.

After the implementation of Cycle II, the student engagement questionnaire and recount text comprehension test were administered again. The results are shown in Table 4 and Table 5.

Table 4. Cycle II Engagement Analysis

Engagement Indicator	Index (%)	Assessment Interval
Attention	90%	Very High
Active Participation	92%	Very High
Motivation for Learning	91%	Very High
Material Relevance	91%	Very High
Average	91%	Very High

Table 4 shows a significant increase in student engagement after implementing Cycle II of the Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) approach.

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All indicators reached the “Very High” category, with an average score of 91%. Attention (90%), active participation (92%), motivation for learning (91%), and material relevance (91%) all showed notable improvements.

These results suggest that students became more focused, involved, and motivated when learning was connected to their cultural backgrounds and personal experiences. The high level of participation also reflects the success of CRT in creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment. Overall, the findings confirm the effectiveness of culturally responsive strategies in enhancing student engagement across all aspects.

Table 5. Cycle II Recount Text Comprehension Test Results

Category	Number of Students	Percentage (%)
Complete	33	92%
Not Complete	3	8%

In Cycle II, the percentage of students who achieved KKM jumped to 92%. This indicates that the optimal implementation of CRT successfully improved students' comprehension comprehensively.

This significant increase in student engagement indicates that the Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) approach has a significant positive impact on the learning process. By integrating students' culture and experiences into the teaching materials and methods, CRT successfully creates a more relevant, meaningful, and engaging learning environment for students. This in turn increases students' motivation, active participation, and attention in learning, which ultimately has a positive impact on their understanding of the recount text material. This increased engagement also contributes to the creation of an inclusive and equitable learning environment, where all students feel valued and motivated to learn.

The results of observations during the two cycles showed a real increase in class dynamics, active participation, and interaction between students during the learning process. In the pre-cycle stage, students tended to be passive, less enthusiastic, and had difficulty understanding the recount text material. They also rarely asked questions or responded to teacher instructions. However, after the Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) approach was implemented, significant changes occurred. In Cycle I, students began to be enthusiastic when asked to write personal stories or discuss local stories that were close to their lives. Interaction increased when they discussed in groups, in accordance with the principles of CRT which encourage collaborative and dialogical learning. In Cycle II, almost all students were active in discussing, answering questions, and were interested in writing recount texts with local cultural themes. They were also more confident when telling personal experiences in front of the class. Documentation also showed an increase in student involvement and understanding, as seen from the results of recount text writing, reflection notes, and visual documentation. In the pre-cycle, students' writing was short, unstructured, and limited in

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vocabulary. After CRT was implemented, the writing became neater, the language was more precise, and the content of the story described personal experiences in more detail.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that the implementation of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) significantly enhanced students' engagement and their understanding of recount texts. Prior to the implementation, students' average engagement score was only 52.5%, categorized as "Sufficient", and only 30% of students met the minimum passing score (KKM). However, after two cycles of CRT-based instruction, the average engagement rose to 91% and the percentage of students achieving KKM increased to 92%. These improvements demonstrate that integrating students' cultural backgrounds into the learning process plays a vital role in fostering motivation, participation, and comprehension.

This is supported by Sukmawati et al. (2024), who emphasize that CRT strengthens student confidence and participation by making learning more inclusive and culturally relevant. When students see their identities and experiences reflected in the materials and activities, their sense of belonging increases, which positively impacts their willingness to engage. Similarly, Rahaman (2024) found that students disengage when exposed to culturally irrelevant content, while culturally contextualized instruction enhances both interest and achievement in language learning. The improvement in students' recount text comprehension also confirms the effectiveness of CRT strategies. Will (2022) observed that students are more motivated and better able to comprehend texts when those texts reflect their lived experiences and cultural contexts. In this study, such strategies included using personal storytelling, analyzing local folktales, and engaging in group discussions rooted in students' local realities. These practices helped bridge the gap between the content and the learners, thereby improving vocabulary acquisition, structural understanding, and content coherence in students' writing.

Observational data also revealed a notable change in classroom dynamics. Initially, students were passive, hesitant, and less responsive. However, as CRT was implemented, they became more active, expressive, and confident in sharing their personal experiences. This aligns with the view of Ladson-Billings (2021), who noted that CRT fosters a more dialogic and student-centered classroom environment that values student voice and cultural knowledge. By the second cycle, students were confidently performing tasks such as group storytelling and collaborative writing, which indicates a shift toward more empowered and engaged learning behaviors.

Additionally, documentation such as student writing samples and visual records confirmed the depth of this impact. Before the intervention, student outputs were often brief, unstructured, and linguistically limited. Post-intervention, their work became more cohesive, contextually rich, and expressive of their personal and cultural narratives. Alim and Paris (2020) support this finding, stating that culturally sustaining pedagogies not only

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enhance literacy skills but also affirm students' identities as legitimate contributors to academic discourse.

In conclusion, the implementation of Culturally Responsive Teaching in this study not only succeeded in enhancing student engagement and learning outcomes, but also validated the importance of cultural relevance in pedagogy. It underscores that when learning is meaningfully connected to students' lives, they are more likely to participate, understand, and thrive academically. These findings support the continued use and development of CRT as a strategic approach in diverse educational settings.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this classroom action research confirm that the implementation of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) significantly improved both student engagement and comprehension of recount texts among tenth-grade students at SMA Negeri 3 Kisaran. Prior to the intervention, students demonstrated low to moderate engagement and limited understanding of recount texts, as reflected in their performance and classroom behavior. Through the integration of students' cultural contexts such as personal storytelling, local folktales, and collaborative discussion CRT successfully created a more inclusive and meaningful learning environment.

Over the course of two cycles, student engagement increased from 52.5% to 91%, and the number of students achieving the minimum competency standard (KKM) rose from 30% to 92%. Observations and documentation further revealed enhanced participation, confidence, and writing quality among students. These results demonstrate that CRT not only strengthens academic outcomes but also affirms students' cultural identities and encourages equitable classroom practices. Therefore, CRT is recommended as an effective pedagogical approach for teaching language skills, particularly in multicultural and diverse educational settings

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