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AI-Augmented Reader's Theater for Authentic Oral Performance and Cultural Identity in Primary EFL Education

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Abstract. This mixed-methods classroom study examined preliminary changes associated with an AI-Augmented Reader's Theater (AI-RT) model designed to connect English oral performance with learners' local cultural identity. A quasi-experimental one-group pretest–posttest design was implemented with 64 Grade 5 students (26 boys and 38 girls; approximately 11 years old) in an Intensive English Program at Wat Sra Kaew School, Thailand. The six-week intervention comprised four two-hour sessions per week (48 instructional hours). In groups of four, students developed a four-scene local-culture script, rehearsed orally with ChatGPT, revised their delivery through three to four practice cycles, performed the script, and reflected on the experience. Data were obtained from an analytic oral-performance rubric, a 12-item confidence and cultural-identity questionnaire, and written reflections. The total oral-performance mean increased from 11.80 to 20.25 out of 24. A paired-samples test indicated a significant mean gain of 8.45, $t(63) = 9.85$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [6.74, 10.16], with a large standardized paired effect, Cohen's $d_z = 1.23$. The largest descriptive gains concerned cultural meaning, expressive delivery, and speaking confidence. Questionnaire construct means also increased for confidence (2.85 to 4.20) and cultural identity (2.90 to 4.30). Reflections suggested that repeated, low-pressure AI rehearsal supported willingness to speak, while local stories about Wat Sra Kaew and the Thao Suranari (Ya Mo) monument gave students culturally meaningful content to represent in English. Because the study used one intact cohort without a comparison group, the findings should be interpreted as promising classroom-based evidence rather than definitive causal proof. The study demonstrates how place-based content, performance pedagogy, and guided generative-AI use can be integrated to support meaningful oral participation in primary EFL education.

Keywords: generative artificial intelligence; Reader's Theater; oral performance; cultural identity; place-based learning; primary EFL

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Introduction

English instruction in many foreign-language contexts continues to face a persistent knowledge–use gap. Learners may complete grammar and vocabulary exercises successfully yet remain hesitant when asked to use English for purposeful communication. This challenge is especially visible in primary classrooms, where limited exposure, fear of error, and teacher-fronted routines can restrict learners’ opportunities to develop fluency, expression, and a sense of communicative ownership. Communicative competence therefore requires more than accurate forms; it involves using linguistic, sociocultural, discourse, and strategic resources to make meaning with others (Canale & Swain, 1980; Richards, 2006).

The problem is not simply that learners lack English. It is also that the English they encounter may be disconnected from who they are and what they know. Identity-oriented perspectives describe language learning as participation in socially meaningful practices. Norton’s concept of investment is particularly relevant: learners participate when they perceive that a language practice offers valued identities, relationships, or forms of cultural capital (Darvin & Norton, 2023; Norton, 2013). A learner can therefore be motivated in a general sense yet remain silent in a particular classroom practice that offers little personal relevance or agency. For young learners, opportunities to speak about familiar people, places, and community stories can make English a resource for representation rather than an imported school subject.

Place-based education provides one route for creating this relevance. It positions the local environment and community knowledge as legitimate curriculum resources (Gruenewald, 2003; Smith & Sobel, 2010; Somerville, 2010). In an EFL classroom, local content reduces the conceptual burden of inventing unfamiliar ideas and gives learners an authentic reason to communicate: they already know the place and can focus on how to convey its meanings in English. Research in *Eternal: English Teaching Journal* has similarly shown that locally grounded media can make English learning more authentic and culturally meaningful for elementary learners (Saud & Rahman, 2019).

Meaningful content alone, however, does not guarantee oral development. Learners require a structure that turns cultural knowledge into repeated, supported performance. Reader’s Theater offers such a structure because students interpret a script through voice, timing, intonation, gesture, and collaborative rehearsal without having to memorize every line. Repeated reading and performance have been associated with gains in fluency, prosody, comprehension, and participation (Kaewsrinuam & Waewchimplee, 2025; Lo et al., 2021; Young & Rasinski, 2009). Compared with fully improvised drama, Reader’s Theater also provides linguistic security for A2 learners: the script remains available while expressive choices gradually become more autonomous.

Generative artificial intelligence adds a further layer of support. Conversational systems can provide on-demand practice, reformulation (Graham, 2023), examples, and opportunities to repeat an interaction without public embarrassment. Yet generative AI does not automatically produce learning. Its responses may be inaccurate, culturally inappropriate, linguistically excessive, or inconsistent, and the use of children’s data raises important privacy concerns

(Jauhiainen, & Guerra, 2023.; Kohnke et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2023). The educational question is therefore not whether AI should replace teacher feedback, but how it can be bounded within a teacher-designed process. In the present study, ChatGPT was used as a repeatable oral rehearsal partner; teachers retained responsibility for cultural accuracy, age appropriateness, feedback, and assessment (Aljohani, 2026).

Three gaps motivated the study. First, place-based language learning, Reader's Theater, and generative-AI-supported practice have generally been discussed as separate pedagogical strands. Second, research on generative AI in language education has concentrated heavily on adult or higher-education learners, with less classroom evidence from primary EFL settings. Third, measures of speaking development often privilege linguistic accuracy while paying less attention to whether learners can express culturally grounded meanings. The AI-RT model was developed to address these gaps by connecting familiar cultural content, scripted performance, iterative oral interaction with AI, and teacher mediation in one learning cycle.

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. What descriptive changes occurred in students' authentic oral performance after participation in AI-RT?
2. Was the difference between total pretest and posttest oral-performance scores statistically significant, and what was its magnitude?
3. How did students' confidence and cultural identity change descriptively, and how did students describe their AI-RT learning experiences?

Literature Review

Communication, investment, and learner agency

Communicative competence reframes successful language learning as the ability to use language appropriately and strategically, not merely to reproduce correct forms (Canale & Swain, 1980). For primary EFL learners, the transition from knowing to using English is shaped by classroom relationships, task demands, anxiety, and the social value attached to participation. Willingness to communicate is situational and dynamic: a learner may possess adequate linguistic knowledge but avoid speaking when the interpersonal risk feels greater than the communicative value (MacIntyre et al., 1998; Richards, 2022).

Identity theory helps explain why culturally relevant tasks can alter this balance. Norton (2013) conceptualizes identity as multiple, changing, and negotiated through participation. Investment connects identity with agency: learners invest in a practice when they see a meaningful return in the form of recognition, belonging, knowledge, or access to a desired community (Darvin & Norton, 2023). In primary classroom research, identity cannot be inferred from a single attitude statement. It can instead be approached through converging indicators, including learners' selection of cultural meanings, expressions of pride and belonging, willingness to represent their community, and reflections on who they can be when using English. The present study therefore operationalized cultural identity modestly as knowledge of, emotional connection to, and willingness to represent local cultural places and stories in English. It did not claim to measure children's entire identities.

Place-Based Learning and Cultural Relevance

Place-based learning draws curriculum from local landscapes, histories, practices, and community relationships. Its mechanism is both cognitive and social. Familiar content activates existing knowledge, allowing learners to allocate more attention to language formulation; local relevance also provides an audience-oriented purpose for speaking. When learners describe a temple beside their school or a locally revered historical figure, the task asks them to translate lived cultural knowledge into communicative choices (Yemini, Engel, & Ben, 2025).

Place-based work nevertheless has limitations. Local narratives are not neutral, and a single authorized story can conceal disagreement or diversity within a community. Familiarity may also be uneven: some learners know a site well, while others may be newcomers. Teachers must therefore check factual claims, invite multiple perspectives, avoid cultural essentialism, and ensure that local pride does not become an expectation imposed on every learner. In this study, Wat Sra Kaew and the Thao Suranari monument were treated as shared starting points rather than fixed definitions of students' identities.

Reader's Theater as structured oral performance

Reader's Theater turns written text into collaborative oral interpretation. Rehearsal draws attention to phrasing, pace, stress, intonation, facial expression, and gesture, while the visible script reduces memory demands. Studies and reviews have associated Reader's Theater with oral-reading fluency and prosody, although outcomes vary according to intervention length, teacher modeling, text difficulty, and the equality of participation (Kaewsriinuan & Weawchimplee, 2025; Lo et al., 2021; Young & Rasinski, 2009).

Reader's Theater was selected over improvised role-play for three reasons. First, the participating learners were working at approximately A2 level and benefited from stable linguistic support. Second, a shared script allowed the same performance dimensions to be assessed before and after the intervention. Third, repeated rehearsal created observable cycles in which learners could act on AI and teacher feedback. Implementation still required safeguards: groups were kept small, roles were rotated, speaking time was monitored, and students who initially participated less were supported with shorter lines before moving to more demanding roles.

Generative AI as a bounded rehearsal partner

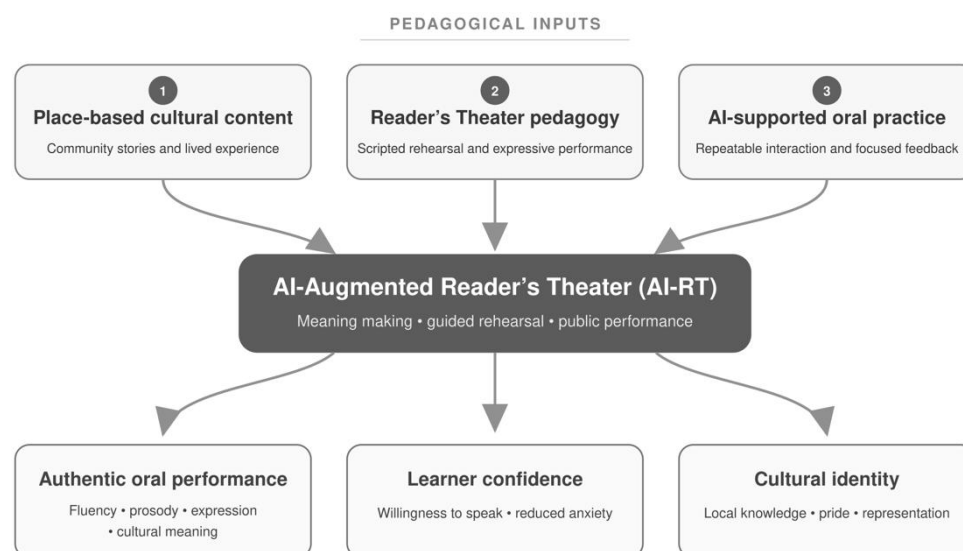
Generative AI can extend opportunities for interaction when individual teacher feedback is scarce. It is available on demand, permits repetition, and can adjust wording when prompts specify an age or proficiency level. From a sociocultural perspective, such assistance can function as mediation when learners use it to perform beyond what they can initially do independently (Vygotsky, 1978). From an interaction perspective, requests for repetition, clarification, and reformulation create opportunities to notice gaps and modify output (Long, 1996).

The affordances are conditional. A chatbot cannot reliably judge pronunciation in the same way as a trained human rater, and it may produce confident but inaccurate cultural information (Huang, Hew, & Fryer, 2023; Rini, & Maruf, 2026). It can also overwhelm young learners with language above their level. The model therefore restricted AI use to teacher-approved accounts and tasks, avoided entering children's identifying information, used short teacher-modeled prompts, and required groups to verify cultural content with the teacher or approved sources. ChatGPT supplemented rather than replaced teacher

judgment. Its unique contribution was the availability of repeatable, low-stakes oral interaction for several groups at the same time (Kohnke, Moorhouse, & Zou, 2023).

Integrated conceptual framework

The AI-RT framework combines three inputs. Place-based content supplies meaningful ideas and an identity connection; Reader's Theater organizes those ideas into repeated expressive performance; and AI-mediated rehearsal increases the frequency and immediacy of oral practice. Teacher mediation surrounds the process by checking content, modeling prompts, monitoring participation, and giving final feedback. The expected outcomes are changes in authentic oral performance, confidence, and learners' ability to represent local cultural meaning.



Conceptual framework of the AI-RT model

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the AI-Augmented Reader's Theater model.

Methodology

Research Design

The study used an embedded mixed-methods, quasi-experimental one-group pretest–posttest design. Quantitative evidence consisted of oral-performance scores and questionnaire construct scores; qualitative reflections were used to illuminate how students experienced the intervention. The design was selected because the two participating classes formed one intact Intensive English Program cohort, and withholding the planned instructional program from a comparable class was not feasible within the school's timetable.

The design supports an examination of within-group change but not an unqualified causal claim. History, maturation, repeated-testing effects, teacher expectancy, and novelty may have contributed to the observed gains (Shadish et al., 2002). Several procedural controls reduced, but did not eliminate, these threats: the intervention lasted only six weeks; all learners followed the same timetable and materials; pretest and posttest conditions and rating criteria were held constant; two raters used the same analytic rubric; and qualitative reflections were compared with

performance patterns. The results are consequently interpreted as preliminary evidence associated with AI-RT.

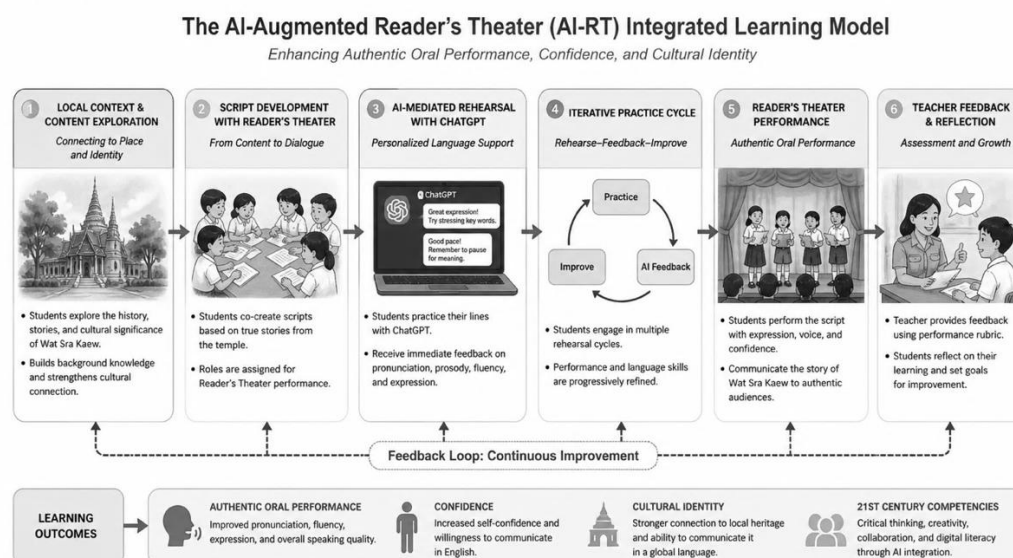


Figure 2. The AI-Augmented Reader's Theater (AI-RT) Integrated Learning Model.

This model illustrates the integration of place-based content, Reader's Theater pedagogy, AI-mediated rehearsal, and teacher feedback in an iterative process to enhance students' authentic oral performance, confidence, and cultural identity. As shown in Figure 2, the learning process begins with local context exploration, followed by script development, AI-mediated rehearsal, iterative practice, performance, and teacher feedback. These stages function as an integrated system that supports both linguistic and affective development.

The figure illustrates the integrated process of the AI-Augmented Reader's Theater (AI-RT) model as a core instructional instrument in this study. The process begins with place-based content, where students explore the history and significance of Wat Sra Kaew, enabling them to connect learning with their local cultural context. This content is then transformed into Reader's Theater scripts, allowing students to engage in structured, performance-based language use. The integration of ChatGPT as a digital language partner supports AI-mediated rehearsal, where students receive immediate feedback on pronunciation, fluency, and expression.

Through iterative rehearsal cycles, students refine their performance, gradually improving their linguistic accuracy and confidence. The process culminates in Reader's Theater performance, where students present their scripts using expressive delivery. Finally, teacher feedback is provided to reinforce learning outcomes and guide further improvement. This cyclical process demonstrates the balanced integration of content, technology, pedagogy, and assessment, forming a comprehensive learning system that enhances authentic oral performance.

Participants and context

Participants were 64 Grade 5 students from two classes in the Intensive English Program at Wat Sra Kaew School, Nakhon Ratchasima, Thailand. They

were approximately 11 years old. The cohort comprised 26 boys (40.6%) and 38 girls (59.4%). School English records placed the cohort at approximately CEFR A2, indicating the ability to communicate in simple and routine exchanges on familiar matters (Council of Europe, 2020).

Purposive sampling was used because the participants were members of the intact classes receiving the intervention. Although students studied in an intensive program, teachers and the curriculum adviser had repeatedly observed that many relied on Thai and avoided initiating English outside structured classroom exchanges. In this study, “limited oral communication” therefore referred not to an absence of A2 linguistic knowledge but to infrequent voluntary English use beyond teacher-directed activities, short responses, hesitation, and reluctance to sustain meaning-focused interaction. The term was used as a contextual participation description rather than a clinical or deficit label.

Table 1. Participant profile

Characteristic	Description
Total	64
Approximate age	11 years
Boys	26 (40.6%)
Girls	38 (59.4%)
Grade/program	Grade 5, Intensive English Program
Approximate English level	CEFR A2
Grouping during AI work	16 groups of four

Intervention and operational definitions

The independent variable was AI-RT: a teacher-mediated sequence combining place-based cultural exploration, collaborative script development, spoken interaction with ChatGPT (Aljohani, 2026), repeated Reader’s Theater rehearsal, public performance, feedback, and reflection.

Authentic oral performance was operationalized as the quality of a culturally meaningful scripted performance across six dimensions: accuracy, prosody, fluency, expressive delivery, speaking confidence, and cultural meaning. Each dimension was scored from 1 (emerging) to 4 (accomplished), giving a total score from 6 to 24. “Authentic” referred to purposeful representation of locally grounded meanings for an audience; it did not mean fully spontaneous speech.

Learner confidence was operationalized as students’ perceived comfort, willingness, persistence, and readiness to speak English during rehearsal and performance. Cultural identity was bounded to students’ reported knowledge of, pride in, emotional connection to, and willingness to represent local community places and stories through English. Both constructs were measured with six questionnaire items on a five-point response scale and interpreted alongside reflections.

Instruments and quality procedures

AI-RT materials

The principal material was a four-scene script, *Wat Sra Kaew: Our Community Story*. It incorporated the temple adjacent to the school, community knowledge, and links to the locally significant story of Thao Suranari (Ya Mo). Language was reviewed for approximate A2 accessibility, and performance cues indicated tone, pausing, gesture, and emotion.

Authentic Oral Performance Rubric

The rubric contained six four-point criteria. For example, a score of 4 for fluency represented generally smooth delivery with meaningful phrasing and only minor hesitation; a score of 1 represented frequent pauses that disrupted meaning. A score of 4 for cultural meaning indicated an accurate, audience-accessible explanation of local significance; a score of 1 indicated isolated cultural words with little explanation. Two educators experienced in English teaching, instructional supervision, and language assessment independently rated the performances. (Graham, 2023). Disagreements were reviewed against the descriptors rather than resolved through impression alone. The reported agreement was 87%, with Cohen's $\kappa = .76$, indicating substantial consistency.

Confidence and cultural-identity questionnaire

The 12-item questionnaire used a five-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Confidence items included statements such as “I can speak English even when I may make a mistake,” “I am willing to perform English in front of classmates,” and “Practising several times helps me speak more comfortably.” Cultural-identity items included “I know why Wat Sra Kaew is important to our community,” “I feel proud when I explain a local story in English,” and “I want people from other places to understand the story of Ya Mo.” Composite means were calculated for the two six-item subscales.

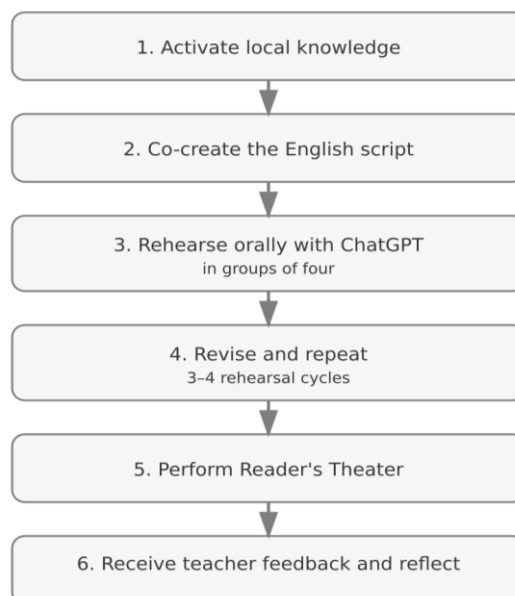
Three specialists reviewed the alignment, clarity, age appropriateness, and cultural sensitivity of the materials, rubric, questionnaire, and reflection prompts before use. Items were revised in response to their judgments. The original numerical IOC and questionnaire reliability output were not available in the dataset retained for the present revision; therefore, coefficients were not reconstructed or estimated. This reporting decision avoids presenting unverified psychometric values. The available inter-rater indices are reported above, and the absence of recoverable item-level validation records is acknowledged as a measurement limitation.

Reflection Worksheet

Open prompts asked what students learned, when they felt more or less confident, how AI helped or confused them, what they wanted an outside audience to understand about their community, and what they would change in a future performance. These prompts generated brief child-accessible reflections for thematic interpretation.

Procedure

The intervention ran for six weeks, four times per week, with each session lasting two hours (48 hours in total). Students worked in groups of four to six. The sequence was recursive rather than a single pass.



Instructional sequence of AI-RT

Figure 3. Instructional sequence used during the six-week intervention.

In Week 1, students completed the pretest performance and questionnaire and activated prior knowledge through photographs, short accounts, and guided discussion about Wat Sra Kaew and Ya Mo. In Week 2, groups selected cultural details and co-developed scenes with teacher scaffolding. Weeks 3 and 4 focused on oral AI-supported rehearsal and script refinement. Students spoke to ChatGPT through voice interaction, listened to its response, repeated or revised lines, and discussed suggestions within their group. In Week 5, groups completed three to four full rehearsal cycles with peer and teacher feedback. Week 6 included final performance, posttest questionnaire, and reflection.

Teacher-modeled prompts were intentionally short and bounded. Examples included:

1. "We are Grade 5 students at A2 level. Please listen to our short scene about Wat Sra Kaew. Ask us one easy question at a time."
2. "Please say this line slowly in natural English, then let us repeat it: 'Wat Sra Kaew is next to our school and is important to our community.'"
3. "Was our message clear? Give us one suggestion about pausing, stress, or expression. Use easy English."
4. "Help our group explain why people in Nakhon Ratchasima respect Ya Mo. Keep the answer to three A2-level sentences. Do not add facts you cannot verify."

Students did not enter names or personal information. The teacher monitored interactions, checked cultural claims, and stopped or corrected responses that were inaccurate, too difficult, or unrelated to the task.

Data Analysis

Criterion and total oral-performance scores were summarized descriptively. A paired-samples t test compared total pretest and posttest scores at $\alpha = .05$. The standardized paired effect was calculated as $d_z = t/\sqrt{n}$. The 95% confidence interval for the mean difference was derived from the reported mean difference, t value, and sample size. Because raw case-level scores were unavailable for the present revision, separate pretest and posttest standard deviations, outlier diagnostics, and

an independent normality test of difference scores could not be reproduced. This constrains the statistical audit and is reported explicitly.

Questionnaire analysis was limited to the retained pretest and posttest construct means. Item-level response distributions and reliability coefficients were not recreated. Accordingly, questionnaire findings are treated as descriptive supporting evidence rather than as a separate inferential test.

Reflections were analyzed using a reflexive thematic procedure informed by Braun and Clark (2006, 2021). The researchers first read all responses, generated concise semantic codes (e.g., repeated practice, reduced nervousness, AI correction, temple pride, Ya Mo representation), compared codes across students, and grouped related codes into candidate themes. Themes were reviewed against the full set of reflections, named to express a central organizing idea, and supported with multiple representative excerpts. English excerpts below are meaning-preserving translations or lightly edited versions of students' short responses; participant codes protect identity.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted under approval ALPS-IRB-W006633. School permission and parent/guardian consent were obtained, and participation did not affect course grades. Student identities were removed from research records and quotations. AI use occurred in supervised groups with no entry of personally identifying information. Data were reported in aggregate form.

Results

Oral-performance changes

All six rubric dimensions increased descriptively. Cultural meaning showed the largest mean gain (+1.60), followed by expressive delivery (+1.50) and speaking confidence (+1.45). These patterns indicate that development was not limited to accuracy; students became more able to make local significance and emotion accessible to an audience.

Table 2. Mean oral-performance scores before and after AI-RT

Dimension (1–4)	Pretest mean	Posttest mean	Mean gain
Accuracy	2.10	3.40	1.30
Prosody	1.95	3.25	1.30
Fluency	2.05	3.35	1.30
Expressive delivery	1.80	3.30	1.50
Speaking confidence	2.00	3.45	1.45
Cultural meaning	1.90	3.50	1.60
Total (6–24)	11.80	20.25	8.45

Paired comparison of total performance

The total mean increased by 8.45 points. The retained test result was statistically significant, $t(63) = 9.85$, $p < .001$. From the reported statistics, the 95%

confidence interval for the mean gain was [6.74, 10.16], and Cohen's d_z was 1.23, conventionally interpreted as large (Cohen, 1988; Lakens, 2013). These estimates quantify the magnitude of within-cohort change; they do not remove the alternative explanations inherent in a one-group design.

Table 3. Paired comparison of total oral-performance scores

n	Pretest mean	Posttest mean	Mean difference	95% CI	$t(63)$	p	Cohen's d_z
64	11.80	20.25	8.45	[6.74, 10.16]	9.85	< .001	1.23

Confidence and cultural identity

Both retained questionnaire construct means increased. Confidence rose from 2.85 to 4.20, while cultural identity rose from 2.90 to 4.30 on the five-point scale.

Table 4. Retained questionnaire construct means

Construct (1–5)	Pretest mean	Posttest mean	Mean gain
Confidence	2.85	4.20	1.35
Cultural identity	2.90	4.30	1.40

These results should be read as construct-level descriptive trends. Item-level response files were not available for reanalysis, so no item means, standard deviations, inferential tests, or reconstructed reliability coefficients are claimed.

Themes from student reflections

Theme 1: Repetition made public speaking feel possible

Students linked confidence to the opportunity to rehearse before appearing in front of classmates. They valued being able to repeat a line, listen again, and try a more expressive version without the whole class watching.

“I could practise many times before the performance, so I was not as afraid.” (S12)

“When our group tried again, I could say my part more clearly.” (S27)

“At first I spoke quietly, but after practising I wanted to make my voice stronger.” (S41)

Theme 2: AI was useful when its role was specific

Students described AI positively when it was asked to model a line, slow down, ask one question, or give one focused suggestion. Their comments did not position ChatGPT as an unquestioned authority; teacher support remained important when an answer was difficult or culturally uncertain.

“ChatGPT said the sentence slowly, and we repeated it together.” (S08)

“It helped our group with pauses, but sometimes the English was too long, so the teacher helped us shorten it.” (S35)

“I liked speaking to it because we could ask again.” (S53)

Theme 3: Local stories gave English a meaningful audience

Students' strongest cultural comments concerned the temple beside their school and the Thao Suranari monument. Familiarity did not make the task trivial; it gave students a sense that they possessed knowledge worth communicating.

"I like the Ya Mo story. It is amazing, and I want other people to know it." (S16)

"Wat Sra Kaew is next to our school. I feel proud that we can tell its story in English." (S32)

"The Ya Mo monument is cool and important to Korat. We should protect the story." (S60)

Together, the themes help explain the quantitative pattern. Rehearsal reduced the interpersonal risk of performance, bounded AI interaction increased practice opportunities, and local cultural content gave students a reason to invest in communicating meaning.

Summary of Findings

Overall, the findings indicate that the AI-Augmented Reader's Theater (AI-RT) instructional model contributed positively to students' authentic oral performance, learner confidence, and cultural identity. Quantitative results demonstrated improvement across all performance dimensions, with statistically significant differences between pretest and posttest scores. In addition, qualitative findings revealed that students experienced greater confidence, reduced speaking anxiety, positive perceptions toward AI-assisted learning, and a stronger sense of pride in their local community. These findings suggest that integrating AI-supported rehearsal, performance-based learning, and place-based content can create meaningful opportunities for both linguistic and affective development in primary EFL classrooms.

Discussion

Authentic oral performance

The large within-cohort gain and improvements across all rubric dimensions are consistent with research showing that repeated, expressive Reader's Theater can support fluency and prosody (Lo et al., 2021; Young & Rasinski, 2009). The present pattern extends that account by highlighting cultural meaning as the dimension with the largest descriptive gain. Students were not only producing smoother language; they were learning how to make local significance intelligible to an audience.

Three complementary mechanisms may explain the result. First, a stable script reduced the cognitive load of generating language while performing. Second, three to four rehearsal cycles supported procedural familiarity and increasingly expressive choices. Third, spoken AI interaction created additional turns for modelling, repetition, and clarification that would have been difficult for one teacher to provide simultaneously to 16 groups. These mechanisms accord with sociocultural mediation (Vygotsky, 1978) and interactional accounts of modified output and feedback (Long, 1996).

AI should not, however, be isolated as the cause. Reader's Theater, time on task, peer collaboration, teacher coaching, familiarity with the script, and repeated exposure to the assessment task could all have produced improvement. The 48-

hour intensity is particularly important: the observed gain may reflect sustained instruction rather than a unique technology effect. Without a comparison group receiving the same local script and rehearsal time without AI, the incremental contribution of ChatGPT cannot be separated.

Confidence and willingness to communicate

The increase in the confidence construct and reflection themes suggests that a private-to-public progression was valuable. Students first tried language within a four-person group, then interacted with AI, repeated lines, and only later performed publicly. This sequence likely reduced evaluative pressure and allowed small experiences of success to accumulate. It is compatible with research showing that enjoyment, anxiety, perceived competence, and immediate classroom conditions jointly shape willingness to communicate (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; MacIntyre et al., 1998).

At the same time, positive responses may partly reflect novelty. Voice interaction with a generative AI system can initially be exciting, and students may report confidence because the activity differs from normal lessons. Longer follow-up and observation of voluntary English use outside the intervention would be needed to determine whether confidence transferred beyond the performance task.

Cultural identity, investment, and place

Students' comments about protecting, valuing, and explaining Wat Sra Kaew and Ya Mo illustrate the specific form of cultural identity examined in this study. English became a means of representing knowledge they already possessed and valued. This supports the investment perspective: participation became connected to recognition as a knowledgeable community member rather than only to a classroom score (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Norton, 2013).

The finding also aligns with place-based education and prior work in *Eternal* demonstrating the relevance of locally grounded cultural resources for young English learners (Saud & Rahman, 2019). Nevertheless, cultural identity is not a single stable outcome that can be "increased" in a simple linear sense. The questionnaire and reflections captured a bounded classroom expression of knowledge, pride, belonging, and willingness to represent. Future research should examine how children negotiate multiple or conflicting local narratives rather than assuming uniform attachment.

Alternative and contradictory explanations

Although the pattern is encouraging, stronger performance may reflect maturation, teacher attention, repeated testing, familiarity with the rubric, peer support, or the extensive instructional time. Students who enjoyed technology may also have participated more enthusiastically than those who were less comfortable with it. Research on generative AI warns that benefits depend on prompt literacy, teacher mediation, output verification, equitable access, and protection of learner data (Jauhiainen, & Guerra, 2023; UNESCO, 2023). Thus, the study does not support unrestricted chatbot use. It supports a bounded design in which AI performs a narrow rehearsal function inside a culturally and pedagogically coherent sequence.

Pedagogical Implications

AI-RT can be implemented without treating AI as the lesson's center. A practical sequence is to begin with one verified local story, develop a short A2-

level script, form groups of three to four, model two or three safe prompts, assign rotating roles, complete several rehearsal cycles, and use a transparent performance rubric. Teachers should preview likely AI responses, require verification of cultural facts, teach students to request shorter or simpler language, and maintain a non-AI alternative for learners without access.

Teacher preparation should cover more than platform operation. Teachers need prompt design, age-appropriate scaffolding, AI-output evaluation, privacy routines, equitable grouping, and strategies for recognizing when automated feedback is misleading. In resource-limited schools, one supervised device per group can support collaborative rehearsal; printed scripts, peer modeling, and teacher audio recordings should remain available. AI should increase opportunities to speak, not create a new participation barrier.

Limitations and Future Research

The principal limitation is the absence of a comparison group. The design cannot isolate AI-RT from maturation, repeated testing, novelty, teacher attention, or the effects of intensive rehearsal. Purposive sampling from one intensive-program cohort limits generalizability. The curriculum adviser and instructional team were involved in implementation, which may have influenced student participation and ratings. Self-report data are vulnerable to social desirability, and the bounded questionnaire cannot capture the full complexity of cultural identity.

A further limitation concerns data retention. Raw case-level performance scores, questionnaire item responses, and the original numeric IOC and internal-consistency output were unavailable for this revision. Consequently, separate standard deviations, item-level results, assumption checks, and psychometric coefficients were not reconstructed. The reported confidence interval and d_z were calculated only from the retained aggregate mean difference, t statistic, and sample size. Future projects should preregister an analysis plan, preserve anonymized case-level data and instrument-validation records, and use independent raters blind to testing occasion where feasible.

Future research should compare (a) local-content Reader's Theater with AI rehearsal, (b) the same intervention with teacher/peer rehearsal but no AI, and (c) regular instruction. Delayed posttests could examine retention and voluntary English use beyond the performance. Comparative studies should also investigate speech-recognition tools, different generative-AI systems, individual versus group interaction, and the experience of learners who are reluctant to use technology.

Conclusion

This study offers promising classroom-based evidence that place-based cultural content, Reader's Theater, guided oral interaction with generative AI, and teacher mediation can operate as one coherent pedagogy. Students showed a large within-cohort increase in rubric-assessed oral performance and descriptive increases in confidence and locally grounded cultural representation. The distinctive contribution of AI-RT is not the use of ChatGPT alone; it is the orchestration of familiar cultural meaning, supported repetition, expressive performance, and careful human judgment.

For primary EFL curriculum design, the implication is clear: global communication need not require children to leave their local identities outside the classroom. When AI is constrained to a transparent support role and local

knowledge is treated as a legitimate communicative resource, English can become a means through which young learners speak both outward to wider audiences and inward from a stronger sense of place.

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