ANTHOR
Education and Learning Journal
https://anthor.org/index.php/anthor
Email. anthor.Jurnal@gmail.com
E-ISSN: 2963 –198X P-ISSN: 2963–2498 | Halaman: 220 - 227
Volume 5 Nomor 6 Tahun 2026

EcoLit Aru: Developing Digital Eco-Reading Texts Based on Aru Islands Ecotourism to Support EFL Students' Critical Reading

Manuscript Information

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Abstrak

Pembelajaran membaca bahasa Inggris di wilayah kepulauan masih terhambat oleh keterbatasan bahan bacaan yang relevan dengan konteks lokal. Teks yang digunakan umumnya bersifat generik sehingga tidak merepresentasikan identitas budaya dan potensi ekowisata daerah, dan motivasi membaca mahasiswa pun terbatas. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengembangkan EcoLit Aru, yaitu bank teks eco-reading digital berbasis potensi ekowisata Kepulauan Aru, sekaligus menilai kelayakannya sebagai fondasi penguatan critical reading mahasiswa EFL. Penelitian menggunakan Educational Design Research melalui lima tahap: analisis kebutuhan, penyusunan blueprint dan panduan, produksi teks oleh mahasiswa, validasi ahli dan revisi, serta uji coba terbatas. Subjek penelitian adalah lima belas mahasiswa semester dua Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris PSDKU Aru Universitas Pattimura yang dipilih secara purposive sampling; dua mahasiswa tidak menyelesaikan teks sehingga tiga belas teks yang dianalisis. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi, wawancara, angket, dan lembar validasi ahli, kemudian dianalisis secara deskriptif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan tiga belas teks eco-reading digital berbahasa Inggris yang terbagi ke dalam empat tema: konservasi dan ekowisata bahari (31%), kearifan lokal, budaya, dan tradisi (31%), sejarah sosial dan harmoni religi (23%), serta agrowisata dan ketahanan pangan lokal (15%). Validasi ahli materi dan ahli media menyatakan teks sangat layak, dan uji coba terbatas memperoleh respons positif sehingga produk mencapai Tingkat Kesiapan Teknologi (TKT) 4. EcoLit Aru layak digunakan pada mata kuliah Extensive Reading dan direkomendasikan untuk dikembangkan menjadi multimedia digital pada tahap penelitian berikutnya.

Kata Kunci:
EcoLit Aru, Teks Eco-Reading Digital, Ekowisata Kepulauan Aru, Critical Reading, Mahasiswa EFL, Literasi Digital.

Abstract

English reading instruction in archipelagic regions remains constrained by the scarcity of materials that are relevant to the local context. The texts used in class are largely generic and therefore do not represent the cultural identity and ecotourism potential of the region, which limits students' motivation to read. This study aims to develop EcoLit Aru, a bank of digital eco-reading texts grounded in the ecotourism potential of the Aru Islands, and to appraise its feasibility as a foundation for strengthening the critical reading of EFL students. The study employed Educational Design Research across five stages: needs analysis, blueprint and guideline development, student-produced texts, expert validation with revision, and a limited trial. The participants were fifteen second-semester students of the English Language Education Study Programme at PSDKU Aru, Universitas Pattimura, selected by purposive sampling; two students did not complete their texts, so thirteen texts were analysed. Data were collected through observation, interviews, questionnaires and expert validation sheets, and were analysed descriptively. The results show thirteen digital eco-reading texts in English grouped into four themes: conservation and marine ecotourism (31%), local wisdom, culture and tradition (31%), social history and religious harmony (23%), and agrotourism and local food security (15%). Material and media experts judged the texts very feasible, and the limited trial recorded positive responses, placing the product at Technology Readiness Level 4. EcoLit Aru is suitable for use in Extensive Reading courses and is recommended for further development into digital multimedia in the next stage of the study.

Keyword:
EcoLit Aru, Digital Eco-Reading Texts, Aru Islands Ecotourism, Critical Reading, EFL Students, Digital Literacy.

Information Production:
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INTRODUCTION

Reading instruction in archipelagic and outermost regions of Indonesia continues to face a basic constraint: the scarcity of reading materials that are relevant to the local context. The texts used in English classes are predominantly drawn from commercially published books whose settings, cultural references and environmental concerns are distant from the lives of students, so that reading is rarely experienced as

e-ISSN: 2963 – 198X
p-ISSN: 2963 – 2498

meaningful (Yuli & Mulyono, 2025). This condition is particularly visible in the Aru Islands, an archipelago in Maluku Province that is classified as an underdeveloped, frontier and outermost (3T) region and that holds considerable ecotourism potential, including mangrove forests, coral reefs, customary rituals, culinary traditions and a long record of interfaith coexistence. None of this potential has been documented as English learning material, even though materials that engage local context have been shown to increase learners' involvement and the meaningfulness of learning, and ecoliteracy-oriented materials have been found to strengthen the relevance of English instruction while cultivating environmental awareness (Retnaningdyah et al., 2025).

At the same time, the notion of literacy has shifted. Literacy is no longer understood merely as the ability to read printed text but as digital and multimodal literacy, namely the capacity to understand, evaluate and produce information across a variety of formats (Gilster, 1997; Lankshear & Knobel, 2011). Twenty-first-century literacy competence includes critical thinking about digital information (Facione, 2011), and in EFL settings the integration of digital literacy can improve the quality of reading comprehension while building global communication skills (Hafner et al., 2015; Hafner & Miller, 2019). Empirical work on digital literacies in language learning further suggests that learner-produced digital texts create authentic purposes for reading and writing and support the development of critical awareness of online information. Nevertheless, research that systematically integrates digital literacy with local ecotourism content in reading instruction in island regions remains very limited.

A parallel strand of research has established that project-based learning is effective in developing language skills and learner engagement (Beckett & Slater, 2018; Krajcik & Blumenfeld, 2006). Most project-based studies in EFL, however, have not exploited local potential as an authentic source of learning texts, and studies of local-wisdom-based learning have tended to concentrate on character education rather than on the development of structured digital text banks for reading comprehension (Byram, 1997; Gay, 2018). The literature on reading, moreover, treats comprehension as an interactive process in which meaning is constructed through the interplay of text, reader and context rather than extracted from the printed page (Grabe & Stoller, 2019), and extensive reading is grounded in the principle that large quantities of self-selected, comprehensible and enjoyable text develop fluency, vocabulary and positive attitudes towards reading (Day & Bamford, 1998; Nuttall, 2005; Renandya & Jacobs, 2016). Critical reading extends this process by requiring learners to question the stance of a text, to weigh evidence and to consider whose interests a representation serves (Facione, 2011). Because critical reading depends on familiarity with the cultural assumptions carried by a text, culturally distant materials impose an additional comprehension burden, whereas locally situated texts allow learners to direct their attention to analysis, evaluation and interpretation.

Materials development research reinforces this argument. Effective materials are contextualised, responsive to learner needs and shaped by principled frameworks rather than by intuition (Graves, 2000; Tomlinson, 2014). The localisation of materials is further supported by work on the cultural dimensions of language teaching, which holds that a text carries cultural meanings to which learners must be able to relate their own experience (Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1993), and by culturally responsive pedagogy, which maintains that academic engagement increases when curriculum content reflects the cultural referents of the learners (Gay, 2018). In archipelagic and rural Indonesian contexts, where English is a compulsory subject but exposure outside the classroom is limited, the availability of locally relevant texts is a precondition for meaningful reading instruction (Zein et al., 2020). Ecoliteracy and ecopedagogy extend these arguments into the environmental domain: ecopedagogy frames literacy as preparation for ecological citizenship, in which learners read the world as well as the word and act upon local environmental issues (Misiaszek, 2018), while ecolinguistics adds that the stories a community tells about its environment shape how that environment is valued and treated (Stibbe, 2015).

The positioning of students as producers of learning content is grounded in two related bodies of work. Research on students as partners demonstrates that involving learners in the design of their own materials increases motivation, ownership and depth of engagement, provided that roles, expectations and support are clearly structured (Bovill et al., 2016; Cook-Sather et al., 2014). Self-determination theory explains this effect by identifying autonomy, competence and relatedness as the psychological nutrients that sustain intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000), a claim echoed in language teaching research on engaging learners in contemporary classrooms (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). Student-generated content therefore represents both a pedagogical strategy and a motivational design principle rather than a mere classroom activity.

Because the study aims to produce a validated artefact rather than merely to describe a classroom, it adopts Educational Design Research, a genre in which the design, development and evaluation of an intervention are carried out iteratively in real educational settings (McKenney & Reeves, 2018; Plomp &

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Nieveen, 2013). Design and development research of this kind requires explicit attention to the internal consistency of the design, to expert appraisal of the product and to formative evaluation with users before wider implementation (Richey & Klein, 2007).

Taken together, the literature indicates that contextualised, digitally mediated and student-produced reading materials are each associated with improved engagement, yet these strands have rarely been combined. Studies of local wisdom in Indonesian ELT have largely addressed character education or oral traditions, while studies of digital literacy have mostly examined urban or well-resourced settings. The gap addressed here is therefore the absence of a structured, validated bank of digital eco-reading texts that is generated by students from the ecological and cultural resources of an archipelagic region.

Against this background, this study proposes the development of EcoLit Aru, a model for developing eco-reading materials that draws on digital literacy and on the ecotourism potential of the Aru Islands. The novelty of the study lies in three aspects. First, it integrates digital literacy, reading pedagogy and local ecotourism content within a single structured conceptual framework. Second, it positions students as co-designers and content creators of eco-reading texts, so that they are not merely consumers but also producers of learning resources. Third, its output is a bank of digital eco-reading texts designed as the foundation for the development of a learning model and a digital application within a five-year research roadmap.

The objectives of the study are: (1) to analyse the need for developing eco-reading materials based on local potential; (2) to develop and validate the EcoLit Aru digital text bank; and (3) to formulate a conceptual framework of ecotourism-based digital literacy as the foundation for developing a learning model at a later stage. The significance of the study is academic, pedagogical and social. Academically, it contributes to contextual digital literacy theory in EFL; pedagogically, it provides authentic and relevant learning resources for students and schools in the Aru Islands; socially, it strengthens local identity and ecotourism literacy as part of sustainable development in an archipelagic region. The study is also aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals prioritised by Universitas Pattimura (United Nations, 2015), namely SDG 4 on quality education, SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth, SDG 9 on industry, innovation and infrastructure, and SDG 14 on life below water, and with the institutional agenda of island-based research and local potential development.

METHODS

The study employed Educational Design Research (EDR). This approach was selected because it aims to develop educational innovation through processes that occur in real instructional settings while simultaneously producing an artefact and a set of design principles that can be extended in the later stages of the research roadmap (McKenney & Reeves, 2018; Plomp & Nieveen, 2013). In the first year the focus was the development of EcoLit Aru, namely a bank of digital eco-reading texts based on the ecotourism potential of the Aru Islands and written by students of the English Language Education Study Programme at PSDKU Aru within the Extensive Reading course. The study extended over one semester.

The research site was PSDKU Aru, Universitas Pattimura, in Dobo, Aru Islands Regency, Maluku Province. The participants were fifteen second-semester students enrolled in the Extensive Reading course, selected by purposive sampling because they formed the cohort taking the course that constituted the setting of the study and were familiar with the local environment used as the content source. Of these, thirteen students completed and submitted their texts; two did not submit final drafts, and their incomplete work was excluded from validation. Two lecturers of the programme acted as material validator and media validator respectively, and one further class served as the setting for the limited trial.

The procedure comprised five stages. The first stage, needs analysis and identification, began with an assessment of student needs in reading instruction and proceeded to the identification of ecotourism potential in the Aru Islands, since the results of this identification would be processed and used as the substance of the reading texts. The second stage, blueprint and guideline development, produced the working framework of EcoLit Aru, a writing guide to be used by students, and the specification of the digital format in which the texts would be packaged.

The third stage, text production, operationalised the principle of student-generated content. Students were positioned as content creators and were assigned to write eco-reading texts that raised the local potential identified in the first stage, following the guide produced in the second stage. After the drafts were completed, the researchers held consultations, provided revision notes and curated the submitted work, so that the final texts met the intended reading level, factual accuracy and stylistic consistency.

The fourth stage, expert validation and revision, submitted the curated texts to a material expert and a media expert. The material expert assessed the depth of content, the relevance of the ecotourism context and

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the appropriateness of the reading level for EFL students; the media expert assessed the design of the digital format, legibility and navigation. On the basis of the experts' evaluation and comments the product was revised in order to reach the expected standard of quality. The fifth stage, limited trial and finalisation, tried the revised product out in another class in order to observe students' responses to the digital materials directly; after the trial and its evaluation the product was finalised as a text bank ready for use and for publication as the official output of the study.

Data were both qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative data were obtained through classroom observation, interviews with students and analysis of the writing process, including successive drafts and consultation notes. Quantitative data were obtained through a needs analysis questionnaire, a student response questionnaire administered during the limited trial, and expert validation sheets containing Likert-type items on content and media aspects. All data were analysed descriptively. Qualitative data were reduced, displayed and interpreted thematically, while quantitative data were tabulated and converted into percentages in order to describe the distribution of text themes and the level of feasibility of the product. The readiness of the innovation was appraised against the indicators of the Technology Readiness Level instrument (Kemenristekdikti, 2016). Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and students' names were replaced by codes in reporting.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study reached Technology Readiness Level (TKT) 4 through the development and validation of the EcoLit Aru product. The production process, which applied the principle of student-generated content in the Extensive Reading course, was implemented successfully and yielded thirteen digital eco-reading texts in English. All thirteen texts address local wisdom, ecotourism potential, cultural history and nature conservation in the Aru Islands, and all passed a two-stage validation by a material expert, who assessed the depth of content, the relevance of the local ecotourism context and the appropriateness of the reading level, and by a media expert, who assessed the design of the digital format, legibility and navigation.

Thematic Distribution of the EcoLit Aru Texts

The thirteen validated texts are distributed across four themes, as presented in Table 1. The table lists the title of every validated text together with its theme, so that the scope of the bank and the balance of its content can be appraised directly.

Table 1. The Thirteen EcoLit Aru Eco-Reading Texts and Their Themes

No.	Title of the EcoLit Aru text	Theme (n; %)
1	Mud Crabs: Treasures of the Mangrove Forest	Conservation and marine ecotourism (n = 4; 31%)
2	Lorang: The Hidden Paradise	
3	The Coral Reefs of Babi Island	
4	Exploring the Tourism Potential of Papaliseran Beach, Aru Islands	
5	The Aru Islands and Jepa-Jepa: Culinary Tourism and Local Food Security	Agrotourism and local food security (n = 2; 15%)
6	Discovering the Ursaguli Agrotourism Park	
7	Tambaroro: A Ritual of Gratitude	Local wisdom, culture and tradition (n = 4; 31%)
8	Tais Tanimbar: Life, Tradition and Identity	
9	A Traditional Song of Skipjack Tuna Fishing in Ngaibor Village	
10	Aru Traditional Attire: A Symbol of Ancestral Identity in the Aru Islands	
11	Harmony of Two Faiths on the Coast of Karangguli	Social history and religious harmony (n = 3; 23%)
12	The Payansian Clan's Journey from Enjakarang to Ilar Matay	
13	Preserving Heritage and Building Progress in Lamerang, Kepulauan Aru	

The distribution indicates that students' interests were concentrated on two pillars of Aru identity. Conservation and marine ecotourism accounted for four texts (31%) and local wisdom, culture and tradition for a further four (31%), while social history and religious harmony contributed three texts (23%) and agrotourism and local food security two (15%). This pattern is sociologically plausible: the students live in a maritime community whose livelihood, ritual calendar and collective memory are organised around the sea and around customary institutions, so that the topics they chose reproduce the categories through which they experience their own environment. The comparatively small number of texts on agrotourism reflects the limited development of agricultural tourism in the regency rather than a lack of student interest.

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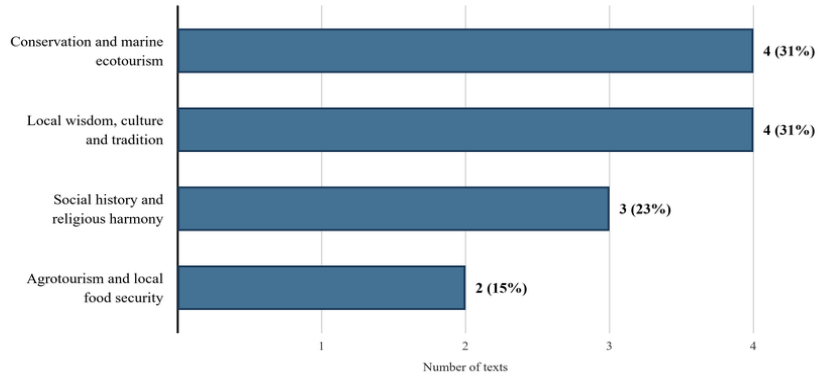


Figure 1. Percentage Distribution of the EcoLit Aru Texts by Theme (n = 13)

The concentration of texts in the first and third themes has two consequences for pedagogical use. On the one hand, it guarantees a substantial body of reading material on marine conservation and customary practice, which is precisely the content that supports ecoliteracy objectives. On the other hand, it identifies a gap that the second year of the roadmap should address, since agrotourism and local food security constitute a comparatively thin strand that would need to be expanded if the bank is to represent the full range of regional potential.

Expert Validation and Achievement of Technology Readiness Level 4

Validation confirmed that the bank is very feasible functionally. The material validator judged the reading content and the language structure to be well integrated and to match the reading comprehension capacity of the target users, while the media validator judged the digital format suitable for independent use, with legible typography and coherent navigation. Revisions requested by both experts were carried out before the trial, so that the validated texts are not raw drafts but reviewed products. Table 2 summarises how each indicator of readiness was satisfied in the study.

Table 2. Indicators of Technology Readiness Level 4 and the Evidence Obtained

Indicator of TKT 4	Evidence obtained in the study
Completion of a concrete prototype	Thirteen digital eco-reading texts in English were produced by students through student-generated content in the Extensive Reading course, addressing local wisdom, ecotourism potential, cultural history and nature conservation in the Aru Islands.
Systematic expert validation	All thirteen manuscripts were reviewed by a material expert (depth of content, relevance of the local ecotourism context, appropriateness of the reading level) and by a media expert (design of the digital format, legibility, navigation).
Confirmation of functional feasibility	The validators judged the bank very feasible; reading content and language structure were found to be integrated and matched to the reading comprehension capacity of the target users.
Readiness for wider testing	A limited trial in a further class recorded positive student responses, indicating that the conceptual approach works as intended before an experimental trial at TKT 5.

The evidence in Table 2 corresponds to the four indicators that define TKT 4: the realisation of the initial concept as a concrete prototype, the systematic review and validation of the prototype by subject experts, the confirmation of functional feasibility, and the completion of a limited trial showing that the proposed conceptual approach works as intended before implementation at the scale of a wider experimental classroom trial at TKT 5. The achievement is therefore not a claim based on the volume of texts produced but on the documented sequence of design, review and trial.

Student Responses and the Pedagogical Value of Student-Generated Content

The limited trial produced favourable student responses. In the discussion that followed the trial, students indicated that the texts were easier to engage with than commercially published materials because the places, practices and conflicts they described were recognisable, and they singled out the localisation of content as the feature that most supported their comprehension. This finding is consistent with culturally responsive pedagogy, which holds that engagement increases when curriculum content reflects learners' cultural referents (Gay, 2018), and with work on the cultural dimension of language teaching that treats the text as a carrier of cultural meaning to which the reader must be able to relate (Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1993).

The production process itself constitutes a second, less visible outcome. Because students wrote the texts, they moved from consumers to producers of reading material, a shift that research on students as partners

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associates with increased motivation, ownership and depth of engagement (Bovill et al., 2016; Cook-Sather et al., 2014). Self-determination theory offers an explanation of the mechanism: the task afforded autonomy in the choice of topic, competence through the achievement of a publishable text, and relatedness through consultation with lecturers and with the community whose practices were described (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The distance between first drafts and validated versions, documented in the consultation notes, suggests that the iterative revision cycle functioned as formative feedback on academic writing as well as on content.

The design also illustrates the value of extending extensive reading beyond the provision of graded readers. The principles that make extensive reading effective, namely comprehensible input, learner choice and the experience of reading for meaning (Day & Bamford, 1998; Renandya & Jacobs, 2016), were satisfied by texts whose difficulty was calibrated to the second semester while their content remained authentic. The digital packaging adds a multimodal dimension in which layout, headings and visual elements contribute to meaning, in line with accounts of multimodal literacy that treat image and design as integral to the text rather than as decoration (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021; Serafini, 2014).

From the perspective of ecoliteracy, the bank performs a function that extends beyond language development. By documenting mangrove ecosystems, coral reefs, customary rituals and interfaith coexistence, the texts make the ecological and cultural assets of the archipelago legible in English, and they position students as interpreters of their own environment for an outside readership. This corresponds to the ecopedagogical claim that literacy prepares learners for ecological citizenship (Misiaszek, 2018) and to the ecolinguistic observation that the stories a community tells about its environment shape how that environment is valued (Stibbe, 2015). It also gives the institution a concrete instrument for the island-based and locality-based research agenda expressed in its strategic plan.

Three limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study was conducted at a single site with a small cohort, so the findings describe a design case rather than a generalisable effect. Second, the validation was qualitative and categorical, and no effect size for critical reading was estimated; the claim advanced here concerns the feasibility and quality of the product, not its measured impact on reading ability. Third, the trial was limited in scope and duration, which is inherent to TKT 4 and delimits the inference that can be drawn about implementation at scale. These limitations define the agenda for the second year rather than diminishing the value of the artefact produced.

The implications are twofold. For practice, the procedure offers a transferable template: identify local potential, prepare a blueprint and writing guide, assign text production to students, validate with content and media experts, and trial the product in a further class. For research, the validated bank provides the stimulus material required by the experimental design planned for the next stage, in which the effect of EcoLit Aru on reading comprehension and critical reading is to be measured quantitatively and the materials are to be extended into a multimodal digital storytelling format and a mobile application.

CONCLUSION

Drawing on the first year of implementation through Educational Design Research, four conclusions can be stated. First, the study succeeded in designing and developing EcoLit Aru, a bank of digital eco-reading texts that specifically explores the ecotourism potential, local wisdom, social history and nature conservation of the Aru Islands. Second, the application of student-generated content within the Extensive Reading course proved effective: students actively produced thirteen authentic English reading texts rich in local context. Third, all thirteen manuscripts passed rigorous validation by a material expert and a media expert with a favourable feasibility status, which indicates that the innovation meets Technology Readiness Level 4, at which the bank is validated and ready for implementation in genuine learning scenarios. Fourth, the availability of EcoLit Aru offers a concrete response to the shortage of reading materials in archipelagic regions by providing literacy resources that develop English proficiency while remaining relevant to the environmental and cultural identity of students at PSDKU Aru.

Four recommendations follow. First, the thirteen validated texts are strongly recommended for expansion in the following year into a richer multimodal medium, such as digital storytelling combined with audio-visual elements or integration into a mobile application. Second, a follow-up study with an experimental design is needed in order to test quantitatively the effect of the bank on reading comprehension and critical reading skill. Third, the reach of the trial and of implementation should be extended to secondary schools in Aru Islands Regency, so that an eco-digital literacy ecosystem can grow and cultivate awareness of ecotourism and environmental sustainability from school age. Fourth, further work should develop a guide or training module for English teachers on constructing appropriate assessment instruments for reading materials based on local ecotourism content and on issues of sustainable development.

e-ISSN: 2963 – 198X
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Acknowledge

The authors express their gratitude to the Institute for Research and Community Service (LPPM) of Universitas Pattimura for funding this study under the Penelitian Dasar Unggulan UNPATTI scheme within the Dosen Pemula Research Capacity Improvement Programme for the fiscal year 2026. Appreciation is also extended to the material and media validators, to the lecturers and students of the English Language Education Study Programme at PSDKU Aru who participated in the production and trial of the texts, and to the community of the Aru Islands whose ecological and cultural knowledge forms the substance of EcoLit Aru.

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