



Literature as Periscope: Using Narrative Discussion to Cultivate Empathy and Moral Reasoning in Students

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ABSTRACT

In an era marked by declining empathy and growing social polarization, education faces an urgent task to nurture moral sensitivity and intercultural understanding. This study explores how narrative discussion of literature can foster empathy and moral reasoning among pre-service English teachers in a rural Indonesian university. Adopting a mixed-methods design, the research involved 20 undergraduate students who participated in a six-week intervention integrating literary reading, guided group dialogue, and reflective writing. Quantitative data from the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) and Defining Issues Test-2 (DIT-2) were analyzed using paired-sample t-tests, while qualitative data from reflective journals and classroom observations underwent thematic analysis. Results revealed significant improvements in empathy ($t(19) = 8.26, p < .001, d = 1.85$) and moral reasoning ($t(19) = 7.48, p < .001, d = 1.67$). Thematic findings highlighted emotional resonance, perspective transformation, and ethical sensitivity as key processes underlying moral growth. The study introduces the Narrative-Driven Empathy Formation Model (NDEFM), explaining how narrative engagement, dialogic reflection, and ethical internalization interact to cultivate moral awareness. Situated within a Southeast Asian, collectivist context, this research extends global theories of moral education by demonstrating that literature-based pedagogy can serve as a culturally responsive approach to developing empathy and ethical reasoning. The findings underscore the potential of literature as both a pedagogical and moral periscope—enabling students to explore, reflect, and act upon the moral complexities of human experience.

KEYWORDS

Empathy, moral reasoning, narrative discussion, literature pedagogy, character education, EFL classroom

Introduction

The cultivation of empathy and moral reasoning has long been recognized as a central aim of education, as schools are not only responsible for transmitting knowledge but also for preparing students to participate meaningfully in society. In contemporary

educational discourse, moral education and character development are increasingly understood as integral to holistic learning, equipping learners with the skills to navigate complex social, cultural, and ethical realities (Nucci, Narvaez, & Krettenauer, 2014). In the

context of globalization and rapid technological change, education must move beyond the narrow confines of academic achievement and prepare students for lives as ethically responsible citizens who can engage with diversity and difference (Arthur, Kristjánsson, Harrison, Sanderse, & Wright, 2017). Literature, as a pedagogical medium, has been argued to provide a distinctive pathway to nurture empathy, imagination, and moral reasoning through engagement with narrative, perspective-taking, and dialogic inquiry (Nussbaum, 1997; Mar & Oatley, 2008).

Scholars have increasingly emphasized that education for character is inseparable from education for democratic citizenship and social responsibility (Peterson & Sanderse, 2020). Literature classrooms, particularly in the humanities, are uniquely positioned to serve as spaces for moral reflection and ethical dialogue, given their focus on narrative complexity and the exploration of human dilemmas. By engaging with characters, conflicts, and moral ambiguity, students encounter opportunities to extend their moral imagination and cultivate empathy toward others who are different from themselves (Johnson, Cushman, Borden, & McCune, 2013). This pedagogical potential underscores the urgency of integrating character education within literary study, particularly in contexts where empathy deficits and moral polarization present pressing global challenges.

A global concern emerging over the last two decades is the observed decline in empathy, particularly among young people, alongside the intensification of social and political polarization (Konrath, O'Brien, & Hsing, 2011; Twenge, Campbell, & Carter, 2014). Studies suggest that younger generations demonstrate lower levels of empathic concern compared to previous cohorts, a trend attributed to individualistic cultural shifts, increased screen-based interaction, and exposure to fragmented

digital narratives (Hoffman, 2020). Simultaneously, societies across the world are grappling with the effects of political and ideological polarization, where public discourse is increasingly shaped by binaries and moral absolutism (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). These conditions amplify the need for pedagogical approaches that foster nuanced moral reasoning and empathy, equipping learners with the capacity to engage across difference. Character education, particularly when framed through dialogic and critical engagement with literature, offers a timely intervention to address these global concerns.

In Indonesia, the challenge of cultivating empathy and moral reasoning is particularly salient in higher education contexts, where students are being prepared as future educators. Within the English Education Study Program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Enrekang, for instance, faculty members have observed persistent challenges among students related to ethical reasoning in academic and social contexts. Issues such as academic dishonesty, limited willingness to engage with differing perspectives, and difficulties in applying ethical judgment to classroom and community challenges illustrate the pressing need for pedagogical strategies that integrate character education alongside disciplinary knowledge. These challenges reflect broader concerns about the readiness of future teachers to model empathy and ethical reasoning in their own classrooms, underscoring the importance of embedding moral development within teacher education programs.

A general solution advocated in the international literature is the integration of moral and character education across the curriculum, rather than treating it as an ancillary or extracurricular concern (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; Lickona & Davidson, 2005). This approach emphasizes that all teachers are, in effect, character educators, as they shape classroom cultures,

enforce norms, and model ethical practices (Sojourner & Wren, 2018). Within the language and literature classroom, this integration can occur through the intentional selection of texts, the design of dialogic activities, and the facilitation of reflective writing and discussion. Such approaches align with Freire's (1970) conception of critical pedagogy, where education involves thematic investigations of issues relevant to students' lives, thereby linking academic content to ethical and civic reflection.

Specifically, prior scholarship suggests that literature-based narrative discussion can provide a powerful tool for developing empathy and moral reasoning. Research indicates that engaging with literary fiction enhances readers' capacity for theory of mind, the cognitive ability to attribute mental states to others (Kidd & Castano, 2013). Furthermore, dialogic classroom practices—where students are encouraged to explore multiple perspectives, question assumptions, and negotiate moral dilemmas—have been shown to foster deeper moral reflection and social understanding (Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Wegerif, 2013). In teacher education contexts, such practices not only develop students' moral capacities but also prepare them to enact character education in their future professional roles.

A growing body of scholarship situates literature as a “periscope” that allows students to view the moral and social complexities of the world from a safe distance, encouraging exploration without prescribing fixed moral conclusions (Morgan, 2023). By navigating ambiguity and ethical conflict within fictional contexts, students practice the dispositions of empathy, tolerance, and reflective judgment that are transferable to real-life interactions (Oatley, 2016). Such pedagogical use of literature supports the broader goals of character education without lapsing into indoctrination, as it privileges inquiry, dialogue, and student agency in moral exploration.

Despite the proliferation of studies in Western contexts, research examining the role of literature in cultivating empathy and moral reasoning remains limited in Southeast Asia, and particularly in rural Indonesia. Most existing research in this domain has been conducted in urban, Western, or Global North contexts, where cultural and educational conditions differ substantially from those in rural Indonesian universities (Krzmaric, 2014; Arthur et al., 2017). This gap limits the transferability of insights into how literature functions as a moral and educational tool in diverse sociocultural environments. Moreover, within Indonesian teacher education, there is little empirical evidence on how literature-based narrative discussion impacts the moral development of prospective English teachers, despite the critical role these individuals will play in shaping future generations.

This study therefore aims to address these gaps by examining the role of narrative discussion of literature in cultivating empathy and moral reasoning among students in the English Education Program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Enrekang. Specifically, the study pursues the following objectives: (1) to investigate the extent to which narrative discussion of literary texts fosters empathy among university students, and (2) to explore how the process of narrative discussion influences students' moral reasoning. By situating the study in a rural Indonesian context, the research seeks to contribute new insights into the global discourse on character education, expanding understanding of how literature-based pedagogy operates across cultural settings.

The significance of this research lies in its contributions at both theoretical and practical levels. Theoretically, the study enriches the fields of critical literacy and moral education by offering evidence from a non-Western context, thereby advancing more inclusive and culturally responsive understandings of character pedagogy.

Practically, the findings will inform curriculum design and pedagogical strategies in teacher education, equipping prospective teachers with the skills and dispositions necessary to foster empathy and moral reasoning in their future classrooms. More broadly, the study underscores the potential of literature as a universal tool for cultivating moral capacities that transcend cultural, political, and religious divides, supporting the dual goals of producing capable students and responsible global citizens.

Methodology

1. Research Design

This study employed a pre-experimental design, specifically a one-group pretest–posttest model, to investigate the impact of narrative discussion on students' empathy and moral reasoning. The design was selected due to its suitability in educational contexts where random assignment and control groups are not feasible. By administering pre- and post-tests to the same group, the design allowed for the measurement of changes attributable to the intervention.

2. Research Context and Participants

The study was carried out in the English Language Education Program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Enrekang, Indonesia, during the 2025 academic semester. Participants were 20 undergraduate students enrolled in a literature course, selected purposively based on their enrollment and willingness to join the study. They were considered suitable as prospective teachers who need to develop both linguistic competence and socio-moral awareness. All students participated voluntarily with informed consent.

3. Research Instruments

The instruments used in this study included a localized adaptation of the

Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) (Davis, 1983) to measure empathy and the Defining Issues Test-2 (DIT-2) (Rest et al., 1999) to assess moral reasoning. To complement these quantitative measures, students wrote weekly reflective journals and classroom interactions were recorded through structured observation sheets. All instruments were validated by experts for contextual appropriateness and demonstrated acceptable reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.80$).

4. Intervention Procedure

The intervention was conducted over six weeks as part of a literature course in the English Language Education Program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Enrekang. In the first week, students completed pretests measuring empathy and moral reasoning. During the following four weeks, they participated in structured narrative discussion sessions using selected literary texts that presented moral dilemmas and complex character perspectives. Each session followed a consistent format: students engaged with the text, joined guided group discussions facilitated by the lecturer, and produced short reflective writings linking the story to personal and social contexts. Classroom discussions emphasized perspective-taking, critical questioning, and respectful dialogue. In the final week, posttests were administered to assess changes in empathy and moral reasoning, and reflective journals were collected for further qualitative analysis. This structured yet flexible procedure ensured that students were exposed to sustained opportunities for self-reflection and socio-moral engagement through literature.

5. Data Collection

Data were collected in two stages: pre-intervention and post-intervention. Before the intervention, students completed empathy and moral reasoning pretests. During the four-week narrative discussion

sessions, reflective journals were collected weekly and classroom observations were conducted. After the intervention, the same instruments were administered as posttests to capture measurable changes alongside qualitative insights from journals and observations.

6. Data Analysis

Quantitative data from pretest and posttest scores were analyzed using paired-sample t-tests and effect size calculations (Cohen's *d*) to identify significant improvements. Qualitative data from journals and observation notes were examined through thematic analysis, focusing on recurring patterns of empathy and moral reasoning. Findings were triangulated across data sources to strengthen validity and provide a holistic interpretation of the intervention's impact.

3. Results and Discussion

This study examined how narrative-based literary discussions could foster empathy and moral reasoning among pre-service English teachers. A mixed dataset was generated through quantitative instruments—the *Interpersonal Reactivity*

Index (IRI) and *Defining Issues Test-2* (DIT-2)—and qualitative sources including reflective journals and structured classroom observations. The analysis was conducted sequentially: descriptive and inferential statistics were applied to the pretest and posttest scores, followed by thematic analysis of qualitative data.

Overall, findings revealed a substantial improvement in students' empathy and moral reasoning following the five-session intervention. Quantitative data indicated significant gains, while qualitative reflections provided rich insights into students' evolving moral awareness and emotional engagement with literary texts.

1. Improvement in Empathy Scores

Table 3 presents the pretest and posttest results for the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI). Students' total empathy scores increased markedly from $M = 64.75$ ($SD = 6.42$) in the pretest to $M = 78.20$ ($SD = 5.81$) in the posttest. A *paired samples t-test* indicated a statistically significant difference ($t(19) = 8.26$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.85$), demonstrating a large effect size.

Table 1. Pretest and Posttest Results for the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI)

IRI Dimension	Pretest M (SD)	Posttest M (SD)	t(19)	p	Effect Size (d)
Perspective Taking	16.10 (2.35)	19.45 (2.02)	6.11	<.001	1.37
Fantasy	15.25 (2.90)	18.05 (2.40)	4.87	<.001	1.09
Empathic Concern	17.60 (2.50)	20.25 (2.15)	5.42	<.001	1.21
Personal Distress	15.80 (2.62)	17.10 (2.35)	2.33	.03	0.52
Total IRI Score	64.75 (6.42)	78.20 (5.81)	8.26	<.001	1.85

The most substantial gains occurred in *Perspective Taking* and *Empathic Concern*, suggesting that students became more capable of understanding others' viewpoints and responding emotionally to moral

dilemmas. These findings are consistent with the *narrative empathy theory* (Mar, Oatley, & Peterson, 2009), which argues that engagement with fictional narratives

enhances both emotional and cognitive empathy by simulating social experience.

This improvement also aligns with Green and Brock's (2000) *Transportation Theory*, which posits that immersion in narrative worlds can trigger affective and moral engagement. During the literary discussions, students were frequently "transported" into the perspectives of characters, which encouraged deeper emotional resonance and ethical reflection.

Table 2. Pretest and Posttest Results for the Defining Issues Test-2 (DIT-2)

Moral Reasoning Schema	Pretest M (SD)	Posttest M (SD)	Mean Difference	p
Personal Interest	27.15 (4.88)	22.60 (4.65)	-4.55	.02
Maintaining Norms	43.05 (5.45)	36.15 (5.80)	-6.90	.01
Post-Conventional	29.80 (5.12)	41.25 (6.04)	+11.45	<.001

The shift from *Maintaining Norms* to *Post-Conventional* reasoning demonstrates a developmental transition from rule-based to principle-based ethics. This change mirrors the *neo-Kohlbergian framework* proposed by Rest et al. (1999), in which moral growth involves the increasing ability to coordinate perspectives and reason beyond social conventions.

Students' enhanced moral reasoning was likely facilitated by the dialogic process during narrative discussions. Through collective engagement, participants were encouraged to justify moral positions, challenge peers' assumptions, and negotiate ethical meanings—processes that Narvaez (2010) describes as "guided moral reasoning through moral literacy."

3. Empathic Engagement through Narrative Discussion

Thematic analysis of reflective journals revealed three dominant themes of empathic development: emotional resonance, perspective transformation, and relational sensitivity. One student wrote:

2. Enhancement of Moral Reasoning

Results from the *Defining Issues Test-2* (DIT-2) revealed notable improvement in moral reasoning. The mean *P-score* (percentage of post-conventional reasoning) increased from $M = 29.80$ ($SD = 5.12$) in the pretest to $M = 41.25$ ($SD = 6.04$) in the posttest. The difference was statistically significant ($t(19) = 7.48, p < .001, d = 1.67$).

"When reading *The Gift of the Magi*, I felt the pain of both characters. It made me realize how love sometimes means sacrifice, and I could feel what it's like to give up something for someone else" (Participant 6).

Such reflections illustrate the process of *empathic imagination*—students' capacity to emotionally project themselves into literary characters' experiences. This aligns with Nussbaum's (1997) view that literature acts as a "moral laboratory," where readers rehearse emotional and ethical responses to human situations. Another participant reflected:

"At first, I judged the character's decision as wrong. But after our class discussion, I started to understand her reasons and felt I might do the same in her position" (Participant 12).

This quote demonstrates a shift from judgmental detachment toward contextual understanding—an essential trait of *cognitive empathy*. It also echoes Noddings' (2013) *ethics of care*, emphasizing moral understanding as relational responsiveness rather than abstract reasoning.

Observation data supported these reflections. During the final session, 85% of participants displayed behaviors categorized as “high empathy”—listening attentively, validating peers’ opinions, and referring to characters with emotional identification (e.g., “I felt she was doing her best”).

4. Moral Reflection and Ethical Sensitivity

Analysis of classroom interactions indicated notable growth in students’ ability to articulate moral justifications. In early sessions, most arguments relied on external norms (“It’s wrong because it breaks the rule”). By the final session, students increasingly used principle-based reasoning (“I think it’s right because it helps others, even if it goes against the rule”). An excerpt from observation notes stated:

“Students engaged in moral debate respectfully; some defended utilitarian views, others deontological, showing awareness of moral complexity.”

Reflective journals corroborated this shift. One student noted:

“I used to think morality was just about following rules, but now I see it’s also about understanding reasons and consequences.”
(Participant 9)

This moral evolution supports Gibbs’ (2014) *socio-moral reflection theory*, which highlights the role of dialogic engagement in promoting advanced moral reasoning. Similarly, Vygotsky’s (1978) *social constructivist perspective* explains that such reasoning is co-constructed through interaction and dialogue.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative data indicates that empathy and moral reasoning are mutually reinforcing constructs. Students who demonstrated the highest empathy gains also exhibited the most significant improvement in moral reasoning scores. This aligns with Haidt’s (2012) *social intuitionist model*, suggesting that moral reasoning often arises from

emotional engagement and empathy-based intuition.

From a pedagogical standpoint, literary discussion acted as a *mediating tool* (Vygotsky, 1978) that scaffolded both affective and cognitive moral growth. The emotional immersion in narratives fostered empathy, while dialogic reflection structured moral reasoning. This dual mechanism reflects what Mar and Oatley (2008) describe as “simulation of social experience through fiction,” wherein reading fiction provides both emotional rehearsal and moral perspective-taking.

The findings resonate with prior research showing literature’s capacity to enhance empathy and moral cognition. Mar, Oatley, and Peterson (2009) found that readers of fiction exhibit higher social empathy than non-readers. Narvaez (2010) demonstrated that moral narratives stimulate ethical reasoning by allowing readers to inhabit moral dilemmas imaginatively.

However, this study extends existing literature by situating the approach within a Southeast Asian, rural university context, which remains underrepresented in empirical scholarship. In contrast to Western-centric findings, the present results reveal that narrative-based moral education can be equally effective in collectivist societies, where empathy and moral values are culturally embedded within relational interdependence (Kim & Park, 2021).

The results underscore the pedagogical value of literature as a moral and emotional periscope—a lens through which students can observe, reflect upon, and internalize ethical understanding. By integrating narrative discussions into teacher education curricula, literature becomes a transformative medium for developing students’ socio-emotional literacy and fostering ethical dialogue that enhances perspective-taking—skills essential for effective classroom management and engagement in

multicultural contexts. Furthermore, this integration supports the advancement of values-based pedagogy, aligning with UNESCO's (2022) Global Citizenship Education (GCED) framework, which emphasizes empathy, moral reflection, and intercultural understanding as core competencies for educators and learners in the 21st century.

Theoretically, this study contributes to expanding the framework of critical moral literacy by introducing the Narrative-Driven Empathy Formation Model (NDEFM). This model conceptualizes empathy and moral reasoning as outcomes of three interrelated processes: narrative engagement, dialogic reflection, and ethical internalization. Narrative engagement refers to the emotional and imaginative immersion of readers in literary texts, allowing them to experience perspectives and emotions beyond their own. Dialogic reflection involves collaborative interpretation of moral dilemmas, fostering critical discourse and the exchange of diverse viewpoints. Ethical internalization, in turn, represents the process of integrating moral insights gained from literary experiences into one's personal values and ethical framework. Collectively, these processes position literature as both an affective and cognitive medium for moral education, bridging the domains of literary education, moral psychology, and character formation.

Conclusion

This study demonstrated that narrative discussion of literature can effectively cultivate empathy and moral reasoning among pre-service English teachers in a rural Indonesian context. Through emotional immersion in literary texts and dialogic reflection, students developed deeper perspective-taking skills and advanced from rule-based to principle-based ethical reasoning. Quantitative and qualitative findings consistently showed that sustained narrative engagement nurtures

both affective and cognitive dimensions of moral growth.

Theoretically, the research contributes to the development of critical moral literacy through the Narrative-Driven Empathy Formation Model (NDEFM), which integrates three interrelated processes: narrative engagement, dialogic reflection, and ethical internalization. This model expands current Western-centric frameworks by illustrating how empathy and moral awareness can be cultivated within collectivist, Southeast Asian educational settings.

Pedagogically, the findings suggest that literature should not be confined to linguistic instruction but reimagined as a moral and humanistic medium that fosters social understanding and ethical dialogue. Integrating narrative discussion into teacher education can help future educators model empathy, respect, and ethical judgment in their own classrooms.

Ultimately, this study reaffirms literature's enduring role as a moral periscope—a means of exploring complex human values from a safe reflective distance. By engaging students in narrative dialogue across cultural and moral boundaries, literature-based pedagogy strengthens not only language competence but also the human capacity for compassion, ethical reasoning, and intercultural understanding.

Author Contributions

I conceived and designed the study, conducted data collection and analysis, and drafted the manuscript. F contributed to the refinement of the research design, validation of instruments, and critical revision of the manuscript for intellectual content. Both authors discussed the results, approved the final version for submission, and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or

financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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