

Comparison of Elementary School, High School, and Teenage Students' Receptions to Modern Indonesian Literature in East Nusa Tenggara

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Abstract: Background: The development of literacy education in Indonesia highlights the need to understand how readers from diverse age groups engage with literary texts, particularly in culturally rich regions such as East Nusa Tenggara. Objective: This study analyzes readers' reception of modern Indonesian literature among three age groups in East Nusa Tenggara: elementary school students, senior high school students, and general youth. Methods: A descriptive qualitative approach was employed using Likert-scale questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and participatory observation. Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively, while qualitative data underwent thematic coding with triangulation validation. Results: Reception develops according to age and social context. Elementary school students emphasize moral values such as honesty and learning motivation. Senior high school students engage more critically with narrative conflict and character development. General youth readers offer reflective interpretations centered on cultural values and local identity. The honesty aspect obtained the highest Likert mean ($M = 4.30$), followed by learning motivation ($M = 4.21$) and empathy ($M = 4.18$). Implications: Modern Indonesian literature serves as an adaptive medium for fostering literacy, character development, and cultural identity across age groups. Literary integration in educational contexts should consider readers' developmental characteristics to maximize its educational and cultural impact.

Keywords: reader reception; modern Indonesian literature; literacy; culture

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INTRODUCTION

Modern Indonesian literature plays a strategic role not only as an aesthetic expression but also as a medium for the formation of literacy, character, and cultural identity. In educational and social contexts, literary works serve as a reflective space that allows readers to understand moral values, social conflicts, and the dynamics of human life. Through the activity of reading and interpreting literary texts, readers not only passively receive meaning but also actively construct understanding based on their respective experiences, age, and socio-cultural backgrounds.

The theoretical foundation of this study is grounded in reader-response theory, which positions readers as active co-constructors of literary meaning rather than passive recipients of authorial intent. Recent scholarship has reaffirmed that the reader-response approach significantly enhances learners' autonomy in interpreting literary texts by encouraging them to draw upon their personal beliefs, experiences, and socio-cultural frameworks (Mujiyanto et al., 2020). Furthermore, Bist et al., (2024) demonstrated that applying reader-response approaches in educational contexts leads to greater freedom of interpretation and fosters deeper engagement with literary texts, as readers actively connect narratives to their own lived realities. At the global level, the challenge of fostering literary literacy has become a pressing concern in the contemporary educational landscape. This phenomenon is further compounded by the

dominance of digital media, which has altered reading habits and diminished sustained engagement with long-form narrative literature. Consequently, understanding how different age groups receive and interpret modern Indonesian literary works is not merely an academic exercise but a critical undertaking with direct implications for educational policy and curriculum design.

Internationally, Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory of literary reading emphasized the role of the reader's personal and cultural background in meaning-making, a premise that has not been systematically examined in the NTT context. Street, (2014) further argued that literacy practices are deeply socially situated and culturally mediated, reinforcing the need for contextually grounded reception studies. The present study addresses this gap by providing empirical evidence of how modern Indonesian literary reception varies across age groups in a region characterized by rich cultural plurality and linguistic diversity.

Modern Indonesian short stories, in particular, serve as a significant didactic resource within literary education. At the primary school level, Saragih et al., (2022) found that the intrinsic elements of Indonesian short stories—including theme, character, and conflict—serve as contextual anchors for young readers in developing their interpretive and literary competencies. Complementing this, Halimah et al., (2020) demonstrated that a critical literacy approach applied to Indonesian short stories significantly improves students' capacity for analytical engagement, thereby enriching both literary appreciation and comprehension.

The novelty of this research lies in its comparative, cross-age, and regionally specific approach to literary reception. Unlike prior studies that examine reader responses within a single age group or educational level, this study simultaneously analyses three distinct reader populations — elementary school students, senior high school students, and general youth — within the same cultural environment. This triangulated comparison enables a developmental mapping of literary reception that has not previously been documented for the East Nusa Tenggara context. The urgency of this research is underscored by the need for literary educators and curriculum developers to tailor literary instruction in accordance with the cognitive and socio-cultural developmental stages of their target audience. Without empirical data on how readers in this region interpret modern Indonesian literary works, the design of literary learning programs risks being decontextualized and ineffective. This research therefore provides an empirical foundation for more adaptive, culturally responsive, and age-appropriate literary education.

Within the specific context of eastern Indonesia, Adam et al., (2022) investigated the strategies and obstacles associated with local wisdom-based literary literacy in language and literature learning among senior high school students in Ternate, North Maluku—a region sharing significant cultural and socio-economic similarities with East Nusa Tenggara. Their findings underscore that locally situated literary learning enhances students' connection to cultural heritage while simultaneously reinforcing their literacy competencies, a finding with direct implications for understanding the reception dynamics in comparable eastern Indonesian settings such as NTT.

This study aims to: (1) describe and compare the reception of modern Indonesian literary works among elementary school students, senior high school students, and general youth in East Nusa Tenggara; (2) identify how age and socio-cultural context shape literary interpretation; and (3) provide practical implications for adaptive literary education. The expected benefits of this study are twofold: theoretically, it contributes to the development of reader-response and reception theory within the Indonesian literary scholarship; practically, it offers evidence-based recommendations for curriculum designers, literary educators, and policymakers in designing more contextually appropriate literary learning. The primary limitation of this study lies in its

purposive sampling method, which restricts the generalizability of findings beyond the three selected sites. Future studies are encouraged to employ larger and more geographically diverse samples to further validate and expand upon these findings.

Developmental research has further demonstrated that age is a significant moderating variable in how readers engage with literary texts. Wang et al., (2023) conducted an empirical study on the reading responses of young children aged five to six, revealing that early readers primarily engage with literary texts at an affective and sensory level, foregrounding characters and moral scenarios over analytical interpretations. These findings suggest that the developmental trajectory of literary reception—from affective to analytical to reflective—is a pattern that operates across linguistic and cultural contexts, including the Indonesian setting. Literary reception studies place the reader as the primary subject in the process of interpreting a text. Elementary school students tend to interpret texts literally and affectively, while high school students begin to demonstrate analytical and critical skills. Adolescents in general, especially those outside formal institutions, have broader interpretive freedom and are more reflective.

The broader context of character education and cultural values in Indonesian education further reinforces the significance of literary reception as a vehicle for moral and cultural formation. Nurasiah et al., (2022) demonstrated that integrating cultural values into elementary school learning effectively develops students' character, fostering tolerance, empathy, and cultural identity. At the policy level, Susilo et al., (2022) identified that character education in Indonesia has evolved toward more integrated and contextual approaches, incorporating local cultural elements as the primary medium for value formation. This is further substantiated by Parhan et al., (2023), who confirmed through a systematic review that local wisdom actualization represents a critical mechanism for character education, underscoring the need for literary learning programs that are culturally grounded and responsive to regional identities.

The East Nusa Tenggara region boasts a strong diversity of cultures, languages, and local traditions, providing a unique social context for literary reception. However, studies of modern Indonesian literary reception that contextually compare across age groups in Eastern Indonesia are still relatively limited. Therefore, this research is crucial in uncovering how differences in age and social background influence readers' reception of modern Indonesian literature. The findings are expected to provide theoretical contributions to literary reception studies and practical implications for more adaptive and contextual literary learning.

Despite the growing body of literature on reader-response theory and literary reception in the Indonesian academic context, a significant research gap remains. Most existing studies focus on a single educational level or homogeneous cultural group, and very few have been conducted within the geographically and ethnically distinct context of Eastern Indonesia. Specifically, no comparative study has simultaneously examined the literary reception patterns of elementary school students, senior high school students, and general youth populations within the East Nusa Tenggara province. This gap limits scholars' and educators' ability to develop reception-informed, age-differentiated, and culturally situated approaches to literary instruction in the region. The present study directly addresses this gap by providing the first comparative, multi-group reception analysis of modern Indonesian literature in this context.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a literary reception study design, which aims to describe and analyze readers' responses to modern Indonesian literary works in depth. The research locations include Lelobatan State Elementary School, Kapan State High School, and the youth community in Kupang City, East Nusa Tenggara. The research locations include Lelobatan State Elementary School, Kapan State High School, and the youth community in Kupang. The research subjects consisted of 90 participants: 30 elementary school students, 30 high school students, and 30 general adolescents. The instruments used include:

a. Likert scale questionnaire (1–5)

The research instrument included a Likert scale questionnaire (1–5) to measure readers' reception tendencies towards aspects of moral values, conflict, character, culture, and reading interest.

b. Semi-structured interviews

In semi-structured interviews, this is used to explore the subjective meaning and interpretation process of the reader.

c. Participatory observation

Meanwhile, participant observation is carried out to observe the emotional responses and interactions of readers with literary texts.

Data analysis was conducted in two stages. Quantitative data were analyzed using mean values and response trends. Qualitative data were analyzed using *thematic coding techniques* to identify emerging patterns of meaning. Data validity was maintained through method triangulation, source triangulation, and *member checking* to ensure the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations. The thematic analysis in this study follows the reflexive thematic analysis framework outlined by (Braun et al., 2021), which emphasises that the researcher's active role in generating, not merely discovering, themes is integral to analytical rigour in qualitative research. This approach ensures that patterns identified in interview and observation data are grounded in participants' actual expressions rather than imposed by a priori categorical schemes.

It is important to clarify that, although the overall research design is fundamentally qualitative, the inclusion of a Likert-scale questionnaire does not constitute a full quantitative study. Rather, this instrument functions as a quantitative component within an embedded mixed-methods framework, wherein numerical data serve a supplementary and triangulating role rather than a standalone analytical function (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The Likert scores are used to identify broad patterns and tendencies in reader reception across the three groups, which are subsequently elaborated and contextualised through the qualitative data derived from semi-structured interviews and participatory observation. This integration of quantitative and qualitative data sources strengthens the validity and depth of the findings by enabling cross-methodological verification of interpretive patterns.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Quantitative Results

Readers' reception of modern Indonesian literature is demonstrated through average scores on several aspects, namely honesty, responsibility, empathy, story conflict, learning motivation, cultural appreciation, and interest in reading literature. Data were obtained through a Likert-scale questionnaire and analyzed descriptively. Table 1 presents the mean Likert scores for each reception aspect disaggregated by reader group. Across all three groups, the overall mean scores are as follows: honesty (M = 4.30), learning motivation (M = 4.21), empathy (M = 4.18), cultural appreciation (M = 4.10), interest in reading literature (M = 4.05), responsibility (M = 3.98), and story conflict (M = 3.85). Elementary school students recorded the highest scores in honesty (M = 4.42), learning motivation (M = 4.35), and empathy (M = 4.31), reflecting a predominantly

affective and moral mode of reception.

Senior high school students obtained the highest mean in story conflict ($M = 4.27$) and responsibility ($M = 4.15$), indicating a shift towards more analytical and critical engagement with narrative elements. General youth respondents recorded the highest scores in cultural appreciation ($M = 4.33$) and interest in reading literature ($M = 4.28$), consistent with a more reflective and identity-oriented mode of literary engagement. These numerical differences across groups are statistically consistent with the theoretical propositions of Vygotsky (1978) regarding cognitive-developmental stages, and reinforce the validity of the qualitative themes emerging from the interview data.

Table 1. Quantitative Reception (Likert Score)

Perception Aspect	Shoes Likert	Interpretasi
Precision	4.20 ± 0.45	All groups excel
Responsibilities	4.25 ± 0.30	Most powerful
Empathy	4.20 ± 0.32	Most persistent
Employment conflict	4.09 ± 0.32	Elementary School Focus On Restraint
Learning motivation	4.20 ± 0.35	Self-focused elementary school
Cultural appreciation	4.10 ± 0.24	Reading interest
An Interest in Reading Literature	4.23 ± 0.43	All high categories

Source: Data Processed

Table 1 shows that all aspects of reception are in the high to very high category. The honesty aspect received the highest score (4.30), indicating that modern Indonesian literature is consistently perceived as a medium for instilling moral values across ages. This finding aligns with the opinion that literary stories are effective in instilling character values because they present exemplary characters contextually. Learning motivation and empathy received high scores, especially among elementary school students. This indicates that early readers tend to respond to literature affectively and emotionally. Conversely, high school students scored higher on the conflict aspect of the story. This indicates increased analytical and critical thinking skills at this level. This finding supports the opinion Eagleton, (2011) that secondary-level literature instruction can encourage students to understand conflict and character responsibility more reflectively.

Qualitative Results

Qualitative results were obtained through semi-structured interviews aimed at exploring the subjective experiences and interpretation processes of readers towards modern Indonesian literary works.

Table 2. Qualitative Reception (Interview)

Response Aspect	Red \pm SD	Interpretasi
Honesty	4.30 ± 0.45	All high groups
Responsibilities	4.20 ± 0.50	Response sensitivity well
Empathy	4.20 ± 0.48	Most powerful in relationships
Story conflict	3.30 ± 0.35	Instant Feed
Learning motivation	4.30 ± 0.45	Most Powerful Parts
Cultural appreciation	4.35 ± 0.43	All groups showed interest

Source: Data Processed

Interview results indicate that elementary school students view literature as a source of moral role models. They tend to associate stories with the good and bad behavior of characters. High school students demonstrate a more critical reception, particularly in assessing conflict and the

consequences of characters' actions. Adolescents generally display the most complex reception, emphasizing cultural values and local identity. They view literature as a representation of the social and cultural realities of society.

Analysis

Differences in reception across age groups indicate that modern Indonesian literature functions as a transformative medium that adapts to reader development. At the elementary school level, literature plays a role in shaping basic literacy and character through affective and moral reception. This aligns with literature's function as a medium for early character education. At the high school level, character education develops toward critical thinking, where students are able to analyze conflicts, character responsibilities, and social values contained in the text. Meanwhile, among the general youth group, literature serves as a means of cultural reflection and the formation of local identity. Reflective and contextual reception demonstrates that modern Indonesian literature plays a crucial role in cultural preservation. Modern Indonesian literature has great potential to be used as a cross-level educational medium that is adaptive, contextual, and relevant to readers' needs.

The high empathy scores registered among all three reader groups in this study align with a growing body of empirical evidence linking literary reading with the development of empathic capacities. Complementing this, Gaspar & Esteves, (2022) found that empathy develops progressively from early adolescence through adulthood, with affective and cognitive dimensions of empathy showing distinct developmental trajectories. The affective empathy observed in elementary school readers in this study expressed through emotional identification with literary characters is therefore consistent with this developmental pattern, suggesting that modern Indonesian literary works function as effective scaffolds for early empathy formation.

At the secondary school level, the demonstrated capacity for conflict analysis and critical engagement with narrative elements reflects a broader educational imperative for higher-order thinking in Indonesian literacy education. (Mukhlis et al., 2023) found that higher-order thinking skills remain underdeveloped in reading literacy assessments among Indonesian secondary students, indicating a persistent pedagogical gap that targeted literary instruction using conflict-rich narratives can help address. (Encabo-Fernández et al., 2023) similarly demonstrated that structured evaluative activities within literary education settings significantly enhance students' critical thinking capacities, offering robust evidence that narrative-based literary instruction is a powerful lever for fostering analytical competencies at the secondary level.

The reflective and culturally oriented reception observed among general youth in East Nusa Tenggara speaks to the imperative for culturally responsive literary pedagogy. G Ladson, (2021) argued that culturally relevant pedagogy must be understood not merely as an additive strategy but as the fundamental condition for meaningful learning among students from diverse and culturally rich backgrounds. Applied to literary education, this principle implies that literary texts selected for youth audiences in NTT should reflect and affirm the region's cultural particularities, enabling readers to construct identity-affirming interpretations. This is further supported by Patras et al., (2023), who concluded in a comprehensive review of culture-based learning in Indonesian primary schools that the most impactful literary engagement occurs when textual content resonates with students' lived cultural realities.

The evolving reading environment in which contemporary Indonesian youth encounter literature also warrants consideration in interpreting the reception patterns observed in this study. Weel et al., (2022) argued that digitised reading environments have significantly transformed how young readers engage with extended textual narratives, with implications for sustained attention, interpretive depth, and affective engagement with literary content. In

parallel, J Coiro, (2021) proposed that a multifaceted heuristic for understanding digital reading must account for motivational, strategic, and sociocultural dimensions that mediate readers' engagement with texts. Against this backdrop, the positive literary reception observed across all reader groups in NTT signals the need for future studies to examine how digital literacy contexts may shape and potentially reconfigure emerging reception patterns among Indonesian youth.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results of this study, it can be concluded that reader reception of modern Indonesian literature in East Nusa Tenggara develops gradually and contextually, reflecting distinct patterns across age groups: elementary school students demonstrate affective and moral reception, high school students engage analytically and critically, and adolescents respond in a reflective and culturally oriented manner. Literature has proven to be a strategic medium in shaping literacy, character, and cultural identity across age groups.

In terms of implications, literary educators are encouraged to adopt a developmentally differentiated approach in which text selection and interpretive tasks are calibrated to each group's cognitive and socio-emotional readiness. At the curriculum policy level, education authorities in East Nusa Tenggara are urged to incorporate locally produced and culturally relevant literary texts into school curricula. Future research should extend this comparative study to other provinces in eastern Indonesia, employ larger samples, and explore the longitudinal development of literary reception across educational transitions.

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