

CULTURAL VALUES IN ENGLISH TEXTBOOKS AND THEIR ROLE IN SHAPING CROSS-CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi nilai-nilai budaya yang direpresentasikan dalam buku teks bahasa Inggris serta bagaimana nilai-nilai tersebut disajikan dalam konteks komunikasi lintas budaya. Dengan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif, data dianalisis dari tiga buku teks bahasa Inggris yang digunakan di tingkat SMA dan perguruan tinggi di Indonesia. Fokus kajian meliputi isi teks, ilustrasi, dialog, serta topik pembelajaran yang mencerminkan nilai-nilai budaya seperti individualisme, kesetaraan gender, kebebasan berekspresi, dan keberagaman. Hasil menunjukkan bahwa nilai-nilai budaya Barat, khususnya individualisme dan ekspresi diri, mendominasi representasi budaya dalam buku teks. Penyajian nilai-nilai ini sebagian besar dilakukan secara implisit, tanpa eksplorasi kritis atau perbandingan dengan nilai-nilai lokal. Temuan ini menunjukkan perlunya pendekatan yang lebih seimbang dalam penyusunan materi ajar agar mampu membangun kompetensi lintas budaya yang relevan dalam era konektivitas digital. Penelitian ini menawarkan wawasan bagi pengembang kurikulum, guru, dan pembuat kebijakan untuk memperkaya pembelajaran bahasa Inggris dengan perspektif budaya yang lebih luas.

Kata kunci: nilai budaya, buku teks bahasa Inggris, komunikasi lintas budaya, literasi budaya.

ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify the cultural values represented in English textbooks and examine how these values are presented within the framework of cross-cultural communication. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the study analyzed three English textbooks commonly used in Indonesian high schools and universities. The focus included textual content, visuals, dialogues, and thematic elements reflecting values such as individualism, gender equality, freedom of expression, and diversity. Findings revealed a dominant representation of Western cultural values, particularly individualism and self-expression, often presented implicitly without critical reflection or local comparison. The study highlights the need for more culturally balanced instructional materials that support learners' intercultural competence in today's digitally connected world. It offers recommendations for curriculum designers, educators, and policymakers to incorporate diverse cultural perspectives and promote critical cultural literacy in English language education.

Keywords: cultural values, English textbooks, cross-cultural communication, cultural literacy.

INTRODUCTION

In a world where communication increasingly transcends national boundaries, mastering a foreign language entails more than linguistic proficiency; it demands cultural awareness and sensitivity. As individuals from different cultural backgrounds interact more frequently be it through education, business,

travel, or digital platforms the ability to understand not just what is said, but *how* and *why* it is said, becomes critically important. Language is inseparable from culture; every expression, idiom, or phrase carries traces of the history, values, and worldview of the people who speak it.

English, as the lingua franca of the globalized world, plays a unique role in this phenomenon. It is not only a tool for communication across nations but also a carrier of cultural norms particularly those of English-speaking countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. As Cortazzi and Jin (1999) assert, learning English inevitably involves some degree of cultural learning, whether consciously or not. This means that teaching materials, especially textbooks, function not just as linguistic guides, but also as *cultural conveyors*.

Textbooks are not neutral. They are curated collections of language, stories, images, and themes that reflect certain ideologies and assumptions. As Gray (2010) puts it, textbooks "reproduce a cultural script," often shaped by the sociopolitical context of their production. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), particularly in countries like Indonesia, many English textbooks are either imported or adapted from Western sources. While this provides access to authentic language and global perspectives, it also introduces learners to a specific cultural lens often one that prioritizes individualism, freedom of expression, and certain gender or social roles typical of Western societies.

For Indonesian learners whose cultural background is rich in collectivist values, communal harmony, and respect for hierarchy this can create both opportunities and tensions. On one hand, exposure to different worldviews can foster global-mindedness and intercultural competence. On the other, uncritical acceptance of foreign norms may lead to cultural dissonance or even identity conflict, particularly when learners are not equipped with the tools to reflect critically on what they are learning.

This brings us to the critical importance of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in English education. As Byram (1997) argues, the goal of language teaching should not only be to produce fluent speakers, but also *interculturally aware individuals* who can navigate between cultures with understanding and respect. This is especially relevant in the 21st century, where digital technologies have made global interaction more immediate and pervasive than ever. From social media to international

collaborations in education and the workplace, learners must be able to interpret cultural signs, manage misunderstandings, and engage meaningfully with diversity.

Given this context, understanding the cultural content embedded in English textbooks is not a trivial task it is essential. Teachers, curriculum developers, and policymakers must be aware of *what* cultural values are being presented, *whose* values are prioritized, and *how* these values are framed. Are they explicitly discussed or subtly embedded? Do they allow space for comparison, dialogue, and critical thinking? Or do they risk reinforcing stereotypes or cultural hegemony?

This study aims to address these questions by analyzing selected English textbooks used in Indonesian high schools and universities. The focus is on identifying the dominant cultural values represented and examining the ways in which they are presented whether through texts, dialogues, illustrations, or activities. In doing so, the study seeks to contribute to a more informed and culturally responsive approach to English language education in Indonesia and beyond.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design aimed at exploring the representation of cultural values within English textbooks. The qualitative approach was chosen to enable an in-depth analysis of how cultural content is constructed, represented, and conveyed through various elements of the textbooks. This method also allows for the interpretation of implicit meanings, ideologies, and cultural narratives that may not be immediately visible through quantitative techniques.

The research focused on a content analysis of three English textbooks: two widely used in Indonesian senior high schools, published by the Ministry of Education and Culture, and one internationally published university-level textbook from Cambridge University Press. These books were selected based on the following criteria:

- Their official adoption in national or institutional curricula,
- Their popularity and usage across multiple schools or campuses,

- Their accessibility for teachers and students in real classroom settings.

This selection ensures that the analysis reflects authentic materials encountered by learners in both secondary and tertiary education.

To guide the analysis, the study adopted an analytical framework inspired by Yuen (2011), which categorizes cultural content into four major domains:

1. Identity and Individualism – how the self is portrayed and valued in personal and social contexts.
2. Interpersonal Relationships and Collectivism – how social connections, family, community, and collaboration are framed.
3. Gender Roles – how male and female characters are represented in terms of behavior, occupation, and social roles.
4. Intercultural Openness – the extent to which materials promote understanding and respect for diverse cultures.

The unit of analysis included various elements from the textbooks, such as reading passages, dialogues, images, vocabulary examples, writing prompts, and discussion tasks. Each item was examined to identify cultural references—both explicit, such as mentions of holidays or social norms, and implicit, such as values conveyed through character behavior, tone, or narrative resolution.

To organize and interpret the data, the researcher utilized NVivo software, a qualitative data analysis tool. This enabled the systematic coding of occurrences, patterns, and themes based on the cultural domains mentioned above. Each code was tagged with additional identifiers to indicate:

- Frequency (how often a certain value appeared),
- Context (in which lesson or topic it was embedded),
- Mode of presentation (explicit or implicit).

This structured coding process allowed for a comprehensive comparison across the three textbooks and provided insight into the dominant cultural patterns, as well as potential imbalances or gaps in representation.

The results of this content analysis are expected not only to reveal the nature of

cultural values presented but also to inform how these values are positioned within the broader goals of English language education in a digitally connected, culturally diverse world.

RESULT

The analysis of the three selected English textbooks revealed a significant prevalence of Western cultural values, especially those associated with individualism, freedom of choice, and personal achievement. These values were consistently present across various components of the textbooks, including reading passages, sample dialogues, writing prompts, and illustrative content. The cultural values were not always directly stated, but rather woven into narratives, character actions, and instructional tasks, creating an implicit learning environment where cultural assumptions are often accepted without question.

Individualism and Self-Expression

One of the most dominant themes across all three textbooks was individualism highlighting the importance of personal decisions, independence, and self-expression. Many characters in reading passages and dialogues were depicted making personal choices that challenged societal or familial expectations. For instance, one high school-level text featured a student choosing to become an artist rather than follow a more “stable” career path endorsed by their parents. The story presented this decision as courageous and admirable, subtly promoting values of self-determination, personal happiness, and freedom of choice typical of Western cultural frameworks.

Writing tasks also supported this theme by encouraging learners to express personal opinions (e.g., “What would you do in this situation?” or “Describe your dream job regardless of what others think”), reinforcing subjective thinking and individual-centered perspectives. While this can be empowering, it may also contrast with collective-oriented cultures like Indonesia, where harmony and familial approval are often highly valued.

Gender Roles

The analysis of characters and professions depicted in the textbooks showed a general attempt toward gender inclusivity, with examples such as female doctors, scientists, or engineers, and male figures in traditionally feminine roles, like caregiving or nursing. These portrayals aligned with progressive ideals of gender equality. However, remnants of gender stereotypes still surfaced occasionally. For example, several group-based activity scenarios continued to assign leadership roles or decision-making tasks to male characters, whereas female characters were more often shown in supportive or emotional roles.

This mixture indicates a partial shift toward equality in representation, but also reveals underlying biases that may go unnoticed without guided discussion or critical engagement. It reflects how cultural change is often gradual and layered within educational content.

Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Awareness

One of the most critical findings was the lack of deep intercultural content. While the textbooks did mention various global festivals, foods, or landmarks such as Chinese New Year, the Eiffel Tower, or Thanksgiving these inclusions were often surface-level and tokenistic. Rarely did the materials explore cultural values, perspectives, or practices in any meaningful depth. For instance, there were no comparative discussions between cultures, no prompts to reflect on students' own culture, and no activities encouraging dialogue across differences.

Moreover, when diversity was included, it was usually framed from a Western-centric viewpoint. For example, global role models introduced in the texts were overwhelmingly from Western countries, with minimal representation of Southeast Asian or Indonesian cultural figures. This raises concerns about cultural imbalance, where learners are exposed to a narrow and possibly idealized version of global culture, rather than a truly pluralistic view.

Mode of Cultural Presentation: Implicit vs. Explicit

A final and significant observation relates to the mode of presentation of cultural values. In almost all cases, the cultural norms, attitudes, and beliefs embedded in the textbooks were delivered implicitly through the behavior of characters, success stories, and societal assumptions presented in the text. There was no explicit reflection or critical questioning of those values, nor any encouragement to compare them with students' native cultural context.

For example, a passage praising a teenager's decision to travel alone around Europe assumes independence and self-reliance as inherently positive. While these may be admirable qualities, the absence of discussion about potential risks, cultural differences, or familial concerns reflects a lack of contextual nuance. Students are expected to "absorb" these values through passive engagement rather than being invited to analyze or challenge them.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm and extend observations from previous research that English textbooks used in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts tend to privilege Western cultural perspectives (Aliakbari, 2004; Shin et al., 2011). The emphasis on values such as individualism, personal autonomy, and freedom of expression aligns with dominant cultural narratives in English-speaking countries. While exposure to these global norms is undeniably beneficial in broadening learners' cultural horizons, it may also inadvertently marginalize local cultural identities and limit the development of critical cultural awareness.

In the Indonesian educational context where students are often embedded in collectivist, community-centered values the uncritical adoption of Western ideals may result in a disconnect between learners' lived experiences and the cultural content of their learning materials. This misalignment can make it harder for students to relate meaningfully to textbook content and may even foster a sense of cultural inferiority or confusion when local norms are underrepresented or absent.

This issue becomes particularly important in the context of cross-cultural communication in a digitally connected world, where learners are not only expected

to use English functionally, but also engage empathetically and appropriately with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. The ability to do so requires more than passive exposure to other cultures; it requires guided reflection, comparative analysis, and intercultural competence building.

The implicit nature of cultural value presentation, as observed in this study, poses another challenge. When values are not made explicit, learners may internalize them unconsciously, without the opportunity to question, interpret, or reconcile them with their own. This can lead to cultural assimilation rather than cultural negotiation, which is contrary to the goals of intercultural communication education.

To address these concerns, educators play a crucial role. Teachers should be trained not only in language instruction but also in intercultural pedagogy: the ability to identify cultural messages within materials and create spaces for learners to reflect critically. Classroom activities that prompt students to compare cultural practices, question assumptions, and share their own cultural narratives can serve as powerful tools for intercultural learning.

Moreover, the limitations of textbooks can be mitigated through the strategic use of digital resources. In an era where students have easy access to online content, educators can introduce authentic multimodal materials such as short documentaries, podcasts, interviews, blogs, or social media posts from diverse cultures. These resources allow students to engage with real-world cultural expressions and help balance the cultural exposure provided by textbooks.

Additionally, the digital era offers unique opportunities for virtual intercultural exchange. Collaborative projects with international peers, online discussions, and global forums can provide learners with firsthand experience in negotiating meaning across cultures, thus strengthening their practical intercultural communication skills.

Ultimately, this discussion suggests that English textbooks should not be viewed as standalone instruments for language learning, but rather as one component within a broader, culturally responsive curriculum. When combined with critical pedagogy and digital enrichment, they can contribute meaningfully

to the formation of learners who are not only competent in English, but also aware, respectful, and adaptable in diverse cultural contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study has revealed that English textbooks commonly used in Indonesian educational settings tend to prioritize Western cultural values, particularly those centered on individualism, freedom of choice, and self-expression. These cultural norms appear consistently across reading texts, dialogues, and instructional tasks, often implicitly embedded rather than directly addressed. While such exposure to global values can enrich students' perspectives, the limited presence of local or non-Western cultural content presents a critical gap in promoting balanced cultural understanding.

The lack of explicit cultural discussion may lead students to absorb foreign values passively, without the opportunity to reflect on or relate them to their own sociocultural backgrounds. This subtle internalization can hinder the development of critical intercultural awareness, which is increasingly essential in today's globalized and digitally interconnected world. In such a world, language learning must not stop at grammatical accuracy or communicative fluency; it must encompass the ability to interpret, respect, and respond to cultural difference.

Consequently, this study underscores the need for a more culturally inclusive approach to English language education. Textbooks should not merely reflect a dominant cultural narrative but should invite plurality, representing diverse perspectives, including local, regional, and global voices. In doing so, they can serve not only as linguistic tools but also as platforms for dialogue, reflection, and intercultural growth.

Educators, in this context, become cultural mediators. They are called upon to guide students in questioning cultural assumptions, making connections between home and target cultures, and developing a mindset that embraces cultural relativism and empathy. Meanwhile, curriculum designers and textbook developers should aim to craft materials that do not present culture as static and one-dimensional, but rather as dynamic, dialogic, and multifaceted.

Furthermore, this study highlights the potential role of digital media and multimodal resources in supplementing textbook limitations. The integration of online content from diverse cultural contexts can offer learners authentic, up-to-date cultural representations that foster deeper engagement and reflection.

Future research may explore the longitudinal impact of textbook-driven cultural exposure on students' intercultural competence or conduct comparative analyses involving digitally native learning platforms. It would also be valuable to investigate how students from different sociocultural backgrounds interpret and respond to the same textbook content, shedding light on the subjective reception of cultural messages.

In conclusion, English language education in the 21st century must evolve into a culturally responsive practice, one that empowers learners to become not only proficient communicators, but also thoughtful global citizens capable of engaging meaningfully across cultural boundaries.

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