

EFL Textbooks as Cultural Artifacts: A Conceptual Perspective on Cultural Representation

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Abstract

English textbooks play an important role in EFL classrooms and are widely used as the main learning resource. Beyond presenting language, textbooks also convey cultural meanings that shape how learners understand language use and culture. While previous studies have extensively examined cultural content in EFL textbooks, much of this research has tended to adopt descriptive approaches that focus on identifying and categorizing cultural elements. As a result, less attention has been given to how cultural meanings are constructed within textbook content and why certain representations tend to be prioritized. This article examines EFL textbooks as cultural artifacts through a conceptual discussion of cultural representation in EFL textbook content. Drawing on a synthesis of established theoretical perspectives, the discussion suggests that cultural content in EFL textbooks is not included randomly but is organized in selective ways that reflect particular cultural priorities. It further argues that cultural representation often remains at a surface level, with limited emphasis on cultural perspectives and underlying values. This condition has important implications for learners' intercultural understanding, as the scope for engaging with deeper cultural meanings may already be constrained at the level of material design. By viewing EFL textbooks as cultural artifacts, this article encourages more critical engagement with textbook content and provides a conceptual foundation for future research on cultural representation in EFL education.

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INTRODUCTION

Research on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education consistently indicates that textbooks play a fundamental role in structuring classroom instruction, particularly in contexts where learners' exposure to English is largely confined to formal educational settings. Within many EFL classrooms, textbooks serve as the primary reference for instructional content, classroom activities, and assessment practices. (Tomlinson, 2011) explains that the widespread reliance on textbooks significantly shapes how teaching and

learning are organized, as materials often determine the sequence of lessons and the types of tasks students engage in. Similarly, (Richards, 2013) emphasizes that textbooks frequently function as the main vehicle through which curriculum objectives are interpreted and implemented by teachers. Consequently, textbooks exert considerable influence over what is taught, how it is taught, and how learning outcomes are evaluated in EFL classrooms.

While textbooks are commonly viewed as pedagogical instruments designed to facilitate language learning, they also operate as important mediators of cultural knowledge and values. This function emerges because language use is inherently embedded in social practices and cultural norms, which are reflected in the texts, images, and learning activities presented in instructional materials. (Aoumeur & Ziani, 2022) demonstrate that cultural representations in EFL textbooks are constructed through linguistic choices and visual resources, reflecting particular ideological orientations related to social behavior and cultural practices. Such representational patterns are not limited to global textbook contexts but are also evident in local educational settings. In the Indonesian context, (Khoeriah et al., 2024) report that cultural elements in EFL textbooks reflect selective emphases across cultural categories, suggesting an imbalanced representation of culture. These findings suggest that textbooks inevitably convey specific cultural viewpoints, positioning them not merely as instructional tools but also as cultural mediators in EFL education.

The cultural role of textbooks becomes more evident when language learning is understood as a process of meaning-making situated within social and cultural contexts. (Kramsch, 1998) conceptualizes language as a symbolic system through which cultural meanings and social identities are constructed, suggesting that language learning inevitably involves engagement with culture. Building on this foundational view, (Byram, 1997) emphasizes that effective EFL learning requires intercultural communicative competence, enabling learners to interpret and relate meanings across cultural boundaries. More recent discussions further extend this perspective. (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013) argue that language education is inherently intercultural, as learners continuously negotiate meaning within culturally embedded discourse. (Widodo, 2018) further supports this view by showing that EFL instructional practices tend to position learners within particular cultural and ideological discourses. Collectively, these studies suggest that cultural understanding is not an auxiliary component of EFL learning but a core element of meaning

construction, thereby highlighting the importance of cultural meanings embedded in textbooks as primary learning resources.

Given the central role of culture in language learning, EFL textbooks serve as an important medium through which cultural representation is conveyed. (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999) suggest that textbooks function as cultural mirrors that reflect particular cultural models while limiting exposure to others. This argument has been supported by empirical research in the field of English language education. (Shin et al., 2011) find that cultural content in EFL textbooks tends to prioritize target and international cultures, whereas learners' local cultures are less frequently represented. In addition, (Widodo, 2018) shows that cultural meanings are embedded not only in explicit cultural topics but also in routine texts, tasks, and visual elements that position learners within specific cultural and ideological discourses. More recent studies in the Indonesian context further reinforce this pattern. (Alfaya et al., 2023) report that cultural content in Merdeka Curriculum textbooks is unevenly distributed, with certain cultural categories receiving greater emphasis while others are minimally represented. Furthermore, (Handayani & Yunita, 2025) demonstrate that visual representations in EFL textbooks implicitly promote particular lifestyles and social practices. These studies indicate that cultural representation in EFL textbooks is systematic rather than neutral, highlighting the importance of examining textbooks as influential cultural mediators.

Despite the growing number of studies on cultural representation in EFL textbooks, much of the existing research has been largely descriptive in nature. Many studies focus on identifying and categorizing cultural elements, such as the distribution of local, target, and international cultures, or on calculating their frequency of appearance in textbooks. While these approaches provide valuable empirical insights, they tend to emphasize what cultural content is presented rather than how cultural meanings are constructed or why certain representations are prioritized. (J. F. K. Lee & Li, 2020) note that such approaches often overlook the broader social and ideological contexts surrounding textbook production, while (Tajeddin & Teimournezhad, 2015) similarly argue that frequency-based analyses may fail to capture the implicit values and assumptions embedded in language learning materials. As a result, dominant descriptive approaches leave a conceptual gap in understanding EFL textbooks as cultural products shaped by educational, social, and ideological forces rather than merely as repositories of cultural content.

To address the gap, this article aims to reconceptualize cultural representation in EFL textbooks by viewing them as cultural artifacts rather than merely instructional materials. From this perspective, textbooks are understood as cultural products that reflect particular assumptions about language, culture, and education. Drawing on this orientation, the article seeks to (1) synthesize key theoretical frameworks used in EFL textbook and cultural studies, (2) clarify how cultural meanings are constructed and embedded in textbook content beyond surface-level categorization, and (3) explain why certain cultural representations tend to be prioritized within EFL materials. This conceptual approach is grounded in the view that educational materials are shaped by broader ideological and institutional forces (Apple, 1990) and that global ELT textbooks often promote specific cultural and social values through their content and design (Gray, 2010). Taken together, the article contributes to existing EFL textbook research by offering a critical and interpretative lens that extends beyond dominant descriptive approaches.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article adopts a conceptual research design to examine cultural representation in EFL textbooks by reconceptualizing textbooks as cultural artifacts. Rather than collecting primary empirical data, the study focuses on the systematic synthesis and interpretation of existing theoretical frameworks and research findings related to cultural representation, meaning construction, and theoretical frameworks in EFL textbook studies. A conceptual approach is appropriate for clarifying key ideas, identifying recurring patterns across studies, and developing interpretative perspectives that extend beyond descriptive accounts of cultural content.

The literature examined in this study was drawn primarily from academic journal articles and scholarly books that examine EFL textbooks in relation to cultural representation, meaning construction, and underlying ideological perspectives. The selection emphasized works that provide theoretical insights or analytical discussions on how cultural meanings are represented and interpreted within textbook content, particularly through texts, tasks, and visual elements. Studies whose primary focus lies on classroom practices or language skill instruction, without a sustained engagement with issues of cultural representation, were not central to the present discussion. Accordingly, the literature reviewed combines influential foundational works

that have shaped cultural and textbook studies since the 1990s with more recent scholarship that reflects ongoing developments in EFL textbook research.

The analysis involved reviewing and comparing theoretical frameworks and research findings related to cultural representation in EFL textbooks. Key concepts from (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999), (Chao, 2011), and (Yuen, 2011) were examined to identify how culture has been categorized and analyzed in previous studies. Through this process, recurring themes and theoretical patterns were organized into an integrated perspective that highlights English textbooks as cultural artifacts within EFL education. This conceptual synthesis provides the basis for discussing patterns of cultural representation and their educational implications.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the results are discussed through a critical examination of previous research, rather than through findings derived from primary empirical data. The discussion therefore centers on identifying patterns of cultural representation in EFL textbooks and considering their implications for EFL education.

Textbooks as Cultural Artifacts in EFL Education

Previous research has increasingly recognized that English textbooks do not function merely as linguistic resources, but also as cultural artifacts that convey particular social and cultural meanings. Textbooks play a central role in shaping learners' exposure to language and culture, especially in EFL contexts where classroom materials often serve as the primary source of input. As (Apple, 1990) argues, textbooks are not ideologically neutral; rather, they reflect specific values and assumptions embedded in their content and design. This view is further supported by (Gray, 2010), who suggests that global EFL textbooks often promote particular cultural images aligned with dominant social and economic interests.

In EFL education, the cultural role of textbooks becomes especially significant because learners frequently rely on textbooks to form their understanding of both language use and cultural norms. (Widodo, 2018) supports this view by showing that EFL instructional materials can position learners within particular cultural and ideological discourses. From this perspective, textbooks can be understood not simply as sources of information to be learned, but as representations that shape learners' perceptions of

language, culture, and social practices. Recognizing textbooks in this way provides a foundation for examining how cultural content is selected, organized, and presented in EFL materials.

Patterns of Cultural Representation in EFL Textbooks

Previous studies on EFL textbooks suggest that cultural content is typically organized according to certain patterns rather than presented randomly. One of the most frequently used frameworks in textbook studies is proposed by (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999), who classify cultural content into three main sources: source (local) culture, target culture, and international culture. This framework has been widely applied to examine which cultures are represented in textbooks and to identify imbalances in cultural coverage. Studies applying this framework frequently report that target culture receives greater emphasis than local culture in EFL materials.

However, while the classification by (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999) is useful for identifying the presence of different cultural sources, it does not fully explain how cultural meanings are constructed within textbook content. In other words, the framework helps answer the question of what culture appears, but it provides limited explanation of how culture is presented and interpreted by learners. To address this limitation, (Chao, 2011) extends earlier cultural frameworks by introducing the concept of a hidden curriculum in EFL textbooks. Chao argues that cultural messages are often embedded implicitly through examples, dialogues, and visual elements that appear neutral but still reflect particular cultural orientations.

This perspective helps explain findings reported in many textbook studies. For instance, (Shin et al., 2011) show that internationally published EFL textbooks often emphasize target and international cultures, while local culture is less meaningfully developed. Similar patterns are also found in Indonesian EFL textbooks. (Khoeriah et al., 2024) reports that cultural content in Merdeka Curriculum textbooks reflects certain cultural priorities rather than offering a balanced representation of different cultural perspectives. These findings indicate that cultural representation in textbooks is closely linked to decisions made in material design and curriculum planning, instead of simply resulting from the presence of cultural topics.

In addition to cultural sources, several researchers have also examined the depth of cultural representation in EFL textbooks. (Yuen, 2011) proposes analyzing cultural content through aspects such as products, practices, perspectives, and persons. This framework allows researchers to distinguish between surface-level cultural elements, such as food or famous places, and deeper cultural aspects, such as values and ways of thinking. Studies conducted in the Indonesian context support this view. (Jismulatif et al., 2022) and (Normalela & Kardena, 2022) find that cultural content in EFL textbooks tends to focus more on observable cultural elements, while cultural perspectives are less explicitly addressed.

Overall, previous studies indicate that cultural representation in EFL textbooks is selective and patterned. By drawing on (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999) classification and (Chao, 2011) concept of hidden curriculum, this study interprets these patterns as the result of deliberate choices in textbook development. Furthermore, (Yuen, 2011) framework helps explain why cultural representation often remains at a surface level. considered as a whole, these perspectives support the argument that cultural content in EFL textbooks should be examined critically to better understand how cultural meanings are constructed and communicated in EFL education.

Educational Implications for EFL Learning

The patterns of cultural representation discussed above suggest several implications for EFL learning and teaching. When textbooks function as cultural artifacts and present culture in selective ways, learners' cultural exposure is shaped by how textbooks frame and organize cultural content. As a result, learners may not encounter culture as a complex and dynamic system, but rather as a limited set of representations aligned with particular cultural priorities. What emerges from this discussion is that EFL textbooks do not simply select cultural content, but also delimit how culture can be understood by learners, particularly by privileging what can be easily presented over what requires interpretation.

One important implication concerns learner's intercultural understanding. When cultural content in EFL textbooks focuses mainly on surface-level elements such as cultural products, festivals, or famous people, learners may develop only a limited understanding of the cultures being presented. Several textbook studies indicate that cultural representation is often reduced to easily observable features rather than deeper cultural meanings.

(Gray, 2010) shows that global EFL textbooks tend to commodify culture by presenting simplified cultural images, while (K.-Y. Lee, 2009) finds that cultural topics are frequently presented as factual information without encouraging learners to interpret or question cultural meanings. In this sense, intercultural learning is implicitly oriented toward the accumulation of cultural information rather than toward engaging with culture as a process of meaning-making. This suggests that the limitation lies not only in the absence of critical tasks, but also in how textbooks pre-structure learners' engagement with culture by defining what is visible, relevant, and worth learning.

This pattern suggests that cultural perspectives and underlying values are often less explicitly represented in textbook content. (Weninger & Kiss, 2013), through an analysis of textbook texts and images, show that cultural representations often remain implicit and unexamined, making it difficult for learners to access deeper cultural perspectives. In the Indonesian context, (Setyono & Widodo, 2019) similarly note that cultural content in EFL textbooks tends to prioritize descriptive cultural information while offering limited opportunities for critical engagement with cultural meanings. When cultural perspectives and underlying values receive limited attention in textbooks, learners encounter culture through a relatively narrow range of representations. This condition offers limited space for learners to engage with alternative viewpoints, underlying assumptions, or multiple interpretations of cultural practices, which may result in a more constrained way of viewing cultural difference.

While (Baker, 2015) and (Sercu et al., 2005) emphasize the importance of pedagogical mediation and critical reflection in developing intercultural awareness, the patterns discussed in this section suggest that such efforts operate within constraints already embedded in the materials themselves. When cultural representation in textbooks remains largely surface-oriented and descriptive, opportunities for deeper engagement with cultural difference are limited before classroom interaction takes place. In this sense, the challenge of fostering intercultural awareness cannot be understood solely as a matter of instructional approach, but also as a consequence of how culture is structured and made available for interpretation within EFL textbooks.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined cultural representation in EFL textbooks by conceptualizing textbooks as cultural artifacts rather than neutral instructional materials. Through a synthesis of previous studies and established theoretical frameworks, the discussion shows that cultural content in EFL textbooks is not presented randomly, but organized according to particular patterns and priorities. These patterns influence how culture is introduced and understood in EFL learning contexts.

By drawing on the frameworks of (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999), (Chao, 2011), and (Yuen, 2011), this article highlights different dimensions of cultural representation in textbooks. While (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999) classification helps identify the cultural sources emphasized in EFL materials, (Chao, 2011) concept of hidden curriculum explains how cultural meanings may be embedded implicitly in textbook content. In addition, (Yuen, 2011) framework provides insight into the depth of cultural representation, showing that textbooks often focus on surface-level cultural elements rather than deeper cultural perspectives.

The discussion also suggests that selective cultural representation in textbooks has important implications for EFL education. Since textbooks play a central role in many EFL classrooms, learners' cultural understanding is largely shaped by the content and structure of these materials. Without critical engagement, learners may develop limited or superficial cultural awareness. Therefore, teachers and material users are encouraged to approach textbooks critically and to support learners in interpreting cultural content beyond factual information.

As a conceptual study, this article is limited to the synthesis of existing literature and does not involve empirical textbook analysis. Future research may extend this discussion by examining specific textbooks in different educational contexts or by exploring how teachers and learners engage with cultural content in classroom practice. Such studies would contribute to a deeper and more context-sensitive understanding of cultural representation in EFL textbooks.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

DYME carried out the literature review and prepared the manuscript. ASP supervised the study and provided feedback that helped improve overall structure of the paper.

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