Cultural Representations in Indonesian
EFL Textbooks: A Synthesis Study

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Abstract

This study aims to synthesize findings from eight qualitative research articles examining the representation of cultural content in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbooks used in Indonesia. The research is motivated by the increasing emphasis on intercultural competence in language education and the need to align textbook content with national character education and global communication goals. Although EFL textbooks are widely used in Indonesian classrooms as primary instructional materials, concerns have emerged regarding their cultural relevance and inclusivity. A thematic synthesis method was employed to analyze the selected studies, focusing on textbooks published or used in Indonesia between 2016 and 2025. The analysis consisted of three stages: coding primary findings, clustering them into descriptive themes, and synthesizing cross-study analytic themes. The findings reveal four major themes: the dominance of target cultures, superficial representation of cultural and multicultural values, cultural imbalance and bias, and the limited application of intercultural approaches. While some locally developed textbooks introduce Indonesian cultural content, they often fail to support deeper intercultural reflection and engagement. This study concludes that Indonesian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbooks need to be more culturally balanced and pedagogically reflective. Integrating intercultural competence into textbook design can better support learners' linguistic development, national identity formation, and the development of global citizenship. The results necessitate critically evaluating and revising textbook content to ensure alignment with national educational policies and intercultural communication objectives.

Keywords: *Cultural Representation, EFL Textbooks, Multicultural Education, Thematic Synthesis*

INTRODUCTION

Indonesians, as non-native English speakers, recognize that proficiency in English is necessary. Since English is represented by countries with "the dominant global political power" (Zein et al., 2020, p. 494), such as the USA and UK, it was considered an international language in terms of lingua franca. English has been established as a global language, and its range of use has been extended to various English speakers with diverse cultural backgrounds. Regarding English as a lingua franca, intercultural awareness is significant for effective communication among multinational speakers (Lim, 2020).

As a commitment to enabling Indonesians to communicate with global citizens, this made a special case for including English in the national education curriculum, paving the way

for its reputation as what Mappiasse and Sihes (2014) called "the first foreign language" that has been taught since independence day. Since English is part of the curriculum, the government provides one of the tools in the teaching-learning process, namely a coursebook.

Coursebooks guide students' activities and provide teachers with English teaching materials. They are a hand-in-hand tool for teachers and students, so the teacher must know how to foster the student's knowledge and skills using the coursebook or textbook (Septiana et al., 2020). They also provide learners with various language inputs and practices (Richards, 2001). Textbooks also influence teachers' preferences for using them as references and promoting an effective learning atmosphere by serving as sources of reading material and exercises (Atiullah et al., 2019). Although many higher-technology teaching and learning tools are available nowadays, EFL coursebooks remain the essential teaching medium for teachers and the primary learning source for students (Gholani, Rimaninikou, and Soultanpour, 2012, as cited in Inaroh et al., 2021). One reason is that coursebooks are necessary to save time, effort, and money (Tomlinson, 2012). Susan et al. (2020) argued that one important medium in the teaching and learning process is the textbook, serving as a material source and guidance in achieving the learning objectives formulated in the syllabus. More importantly, the coursebooks contain reliable content written by EFL professionals who understand the principles behind task design, educational theory, and the realities of classroom teaching (Zakiyah & Rukmini, 2022). It means learners may put their trust in learning proper knowledge from this medium.

Strengthening cultural representation in English language learning in Indonesia is closely linked to the growing importance of promoting intercultural awareness in global education. In this context, learning media play an essential role. As Nurarifah et al. (2025) noted, integrating digital technologies into English instruction enhances students' speaking abilities and creates opportunities to introduce more diverse and contextually relevant cultural content. Despite this progress, ensuring a balanced representation of local culture remains challenging. (Kurt & Cinkara, 2025) observed that although the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) offers a robust foundation for mediating cultural content, textbooks still tend to underrepresent local cultural perspectives explicitly. This issue is compounded by a lack of exposure to authentic cultural contexts, which hinders the holistic development of students' language proficiency. In higher education settings, for instance, Monib and Hadi (2025) found that this limited cultural integration significantly affects university students' ability to engage with English learning fully. These challenges highlight the need to reconceptualize English education in Indonesia as a means of linguistic development and as a platform for promoting cultural identity and intercultural competence through more inclusive, reflective, and locally grounded learning materials.

Although coursebooks are a reliable and valid source of knowledge, this does not mean they should be used strictly. Rather than follow it as a script, it would be much better if teachers use their coursebooks as a resource (Tomlinson, 2012). The reason is that a coursebook may have high academic quality, but it may not be helpful enough for practical application outside

the educational field. As stated by Mustofa & Martina (2019), there are several reasons why textbooks should support the local culture in English language teaching. Besides making it more relevant to English learning, it strengthens the national identity and avoids cultural misinterpretation and stereotyping.

Following the Regulation of the Minister of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia Number 20 of 2018 concerning the Strengthening of Character Education in Formal Education Units, schools are required to participate in strengthening character education among their students. This can be achieved by integrating character values thematically into the learning process or by incorporating them into subjects according to the curriculum's content. A coursebook can help strengthen character education in the school environment. Strengthening character education is implemented by applying Pancasila values in character education, mainly including religious values, honesty, tolerance, discipline, hard work, creativity, independence, democracy, curiosity, national spirit, patriotism, respect for achievement, communicative, peace-loving, fond of reading, environmental care, social care, and responsibility. This implementation mandate is also reinforced in the Circular Letter of the Minister of Primary and Secondary Education of the Republic of Indonesia Number 1 of 2025. Considering Indonesia's reputation for multilingualism and multiculturalism, appreciation and respect for cultural diversity have become fundamental to character education (Setyono & Widodo, 2019).

As awareness of the necessity of multicultural and intercultural education increases, several studies in Indonesia have been conducted to evaluate the cultural content in EFL textbooks used at various educational levels. However, the findings of these studies remain dispersed and vary in approach and focus of analysis. Some argue that cultural representations are unequal, while others say that textbooks can help students develop intercultural awareness. Many previous studies have reported that English textbooks used in school education lack proper cultural or contextual information relevant to the theme and sufficient information about appropriate language use (Ariawan, 2020; Arslan, 2016; Ayu, 2020; Javadi & Tahmasbi, 2020; Kailola, 2017). According to these findings from previous studies, specific guidelines should be provided that incorporate language use and its sociocultural features in English textbooks and connect this sociocultural competence to learners' intercultural communicative competence.

The strengthening of cultural representation in English language learning in Indonesia is inseparable from the importance of fostering intercultural awareness in the context of global education. In the context of learning media, Nurarifah et al. (2025) showed that integrating digital media not only improves students' speaking skills but also opens up opportunities to present more diverse and contextualized cultural content. Integrated learning approaches such as CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) are also a pedagogical opportunity to incorporate language and cultural content in a more contextualized way, as Kurniawati and Atmojo (2025) pointed out in their study in elementary schools. However, the challenge of representing local culture in a balanced way is still an issue. Cinkara and Kurt (2025) found

that although the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) provides a strong framework for cultural mediation, the representation of local culture in textbooks is still less explicit. This is exacerbated by the limited exposure to authentic cultural contexts, which also inhibits the development of students' English language skills at the tertiary level (Monib & Hadi, 2025). Therefore, English language learning in Indonesia needs to be directed at linguistic mastery and at strengthening cultural identity and intercultural skills through more inclusive and reflective teaching materials.

Therefore, this article aims to synthesize the findings of eight qualitative studies conducted between 2016 and 2025 that address cultural content in EFL textbooks in Indonesia. Using a thematic synthesis approach, the article seeks to identify common patterns, significant themes, and implications of cultural representations in these textbooks. This is in response to the implementation of the Regulation of the Minister of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia Number 20 of 2018 concerning Strengthening Character Education in Formal Education Units and the government's commitment to bringing Indonesians the ability to communicate with global citizens.

This synthesis is expected to provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how culture is constructed in English language learning in Indonesia. It will also inform the development of more inclusive and intercultural textbooks, arguing the importance of incorporating cultural content into EFL textbooks.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative synthesis approach, utilizing a thematic synthesis method, to integrate findings from eight qualitative studies that examined cultural representations in English as a foreign language (EFL) textbooks in Indonesia. Thematic synthesis was chosen because it enables researchers to identify themes across studies and develop a broader understanding of the issue under investigation, particularly in the context of diverse studies with a similar focus (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

Research design

The studies included in this synthesis were selected based on several criteria. First, they employ a qualitative approach, utilizing a critical content analysis of EFL textbooks. Second, they focus on cultural representations, including local, target, and international cultures, in textbooks used in Indonesia. Finally, the studies were published in a peer-reviewed scientific journal.

Data Collection

Data was collected from eight scientific articles published between 2016 and 2025. These articles were obtained by searching journal databases, such as Google Scholar and DOAJ, based on thematic relevance of keywords such as cultural content, EFL textbooks, Indonesia, and intercultural competence.

Data Analysis Procedure

The analysis was conducted in three main stages as proposed by Thomas and Harden (2008).

1. Coding Primary Findings

Each article was read in depth to identify relevant quotes or passages regarding cultural representation. These pieces of data were then manually open-coded to mark key ideas or concepts.

2. Clustering into Descriptive Themes

Codes that had similar meanings were grouped into initial descriptive themes, such as "dominant Western culture", "lack of local culture", or "multicultural values".

3. Synthesizing Analytic Themes

The descriptive themes were then interpreted more nuanced to produce cross-study analytic themes that represent patterns of cultural representation, cultural learning approaches, and ideological implications of EFL textbook content.

Validity and Credibility

The analysis was conducted systematically and transparently to enhance credibility, with an audit trail recorded in the form of study summary tables, code lists, and theme structures. Validity was strengthened through the triangulation of data sources across studies from different contexts and levels of education, and by comparing the synthesized results with key theories in language and culture teaching (e.g., Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1993).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

1. Types of Culture Represented

One of the main findings that emerged from the synthesis of the eight studies analyzed was the diversity of the types of cultures represented in EFL textbooks, which were generally classified into three categories: the target culture (British and American culture), local culture (Indonesian culture), and international culture (culture from various non-British/non-Indonesian countries). The typical pattern identified shows that the target culture still dominates textbook representation, while local and global cultures tend to receive a less equal share.

Ariawan (2020) did research using Byram's checklist and found that the EFL textbooks analyzed mainly represented the culture of English-speaking countries, such as the United Kingdom and the United States. It is represented through characters, locations, place names, and communication contexts. Indonesian culture only appeared occasionally and not

substantively. For example, the material of Niagara Falls in the national geography dimension. The writer decides to promote the cultural aspects of the United States and Canada instead of Indonesian culture.

Similar findings were also presented by Ayu (2020), who concluded that the dominance of Western culture shows a lack of balance and partiality towards the cultural context of Indonesian students. It is evident in the names of Western people, such as *Caroline, John, Hannah, Bob*, and *Parker Pearson,* as well as in the names of places like *Minnesota, USA, England, London, Niagara Falls, Ontario, Cave of the Winds*, and *Stonehenge*.

Moreover, Mustofa and Martina (2019) compared two textbooks and found that both showed a significant gap in cultural representation. Foreign culture (especially Western culture) is represented in narratives, dialogues, and visual illustrations. In contrast, local culture is only briefly mentioned in the form of names or examples that are not elaborated upon, such as the material of the family structure in Western countries. The writer chooses *the Smiths* as the name. It is a cultural practice in English-speaking countries that one family has a name used by others to address family members, often by calling them by their family name. The family name is usually derived from the head of the family's surname. This was also emphasized by Supangat and Floris (2016) in their study of global books, which barely represented Indonesian culture at all, indicating a high dependence on content produced for international audiences.

On the other hand, a study by Hasnah et al. (2024) shows a different tendency. An analysis of locally produced textbooks revealed that Indonesian cultural values, including family contexts, local traditions, and daily habits, were more prevalent. However, these representations are still superficial and not entirely linked to intercultural competence. Meanwhile, Sulistiyo et al. (2021) reported that textbooks used nationally have begun to include both national and local cultural elements, but still emphasize normative and descriptive approaches rather than interactive or critical approaches.

In general, this theme suggests that the majority of EFL textbooks used in Indonesia are still oriented towards the target culture, implying a potential cultural identity gap in the learning process. The lack of local culture not only limits students' connection with the content but also discourages integration between language learning and cultural identity formation. In contrast, locally produced books show potential in presenting Indonesian culture more conceptually, although they still need improvement in terms of intercultural content and relevance.

This finding confirms Kramsch's (1993) concern about "local cultural silence" in foreign language teaching, where students are taught to adapt to a foreign culture without getting the opportunity to reflect on and compare their own culture. Unequal representation also has the potential to reinforce the epistemological dominance of Western culture in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. In the Indonesian context, it is crucial to foster the development of culturally inclusive textbooks that not only present the target culture as a model but also promote both local and global cultural values, facilitating critical reflection and

intercultural interaction. Textbooks should be a means to promote intercultural competence, not just a means of reinforcing the dominance of a particular culture.

2. *Representation of Cultural Values and Multiculturalism*

The second theme that emerged from the synthesis was the extent to which EFL textbooks in Indonesia represent cultural values and multiculturalism. Cultural values refer to the norms, beliefs, social practices, and ways of life adopted by a group of people. In contrast, multiculturalism involves recognizing and appreciating cultural diversity within a society or between nations. These representations are crucial in language learning because they can extend students' horizons, shape inclusive attitudes, and help them develop intercultural competence.

The majority of the studies analysed found that the representation of cultural values in EFL textbooks is normative, superficial, and uncritical. Setyono and Widodo (2019) found that multicultural values, such as tolerance, togetherness, and nationalism, are presented, but only on the surface, in the form of homogeneous narratives. The book does not fully encourage readers to understand diversity as a dynamic and complex concept. Likewise, a study by Sulistiyo et al. (2021) shows that, although there are representations of local and national values, such as *gotong royong* and love for the country, textbooks do not feature much intercultural interaction or social issues that reflect the ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity present in Indonesia. Multicultural values are often conveyed through stories or moralistic dialogues that fail to foster students' critical engagement with the surrounding social reality.

Hasnah et al. (2024) analyzed locally produced textbooks. They found that some books have begun to introduce more diverse local cultural values, such as regional customs, traditional ceremonies, and local community life. However, these representations are still not explicitly linked to the principles of multiculturalism or intercultural character education. This indicates that its integration into multicultural discourse remains limited despite progress in incorporating local cultural content. In contrast, the study by Setyono and Widodo (2019) also noted that there is positive potential in using textbooks to promote cultural inclusiveness, provided that the approach used is more critical and reflective. Textbooks can be used as a tool to open space for intercultural dialogue, provided that they do not only present culture as information, but also as material for reflection on mutual identity and values.

This study's findings show a gap between educational policies that promote cultural diversity and their implementation in teaching materials. In a multicultural country like Indonesia, it is crucial for EFL textbooks to convey cultural values descriptively and stimulate students' critical thinking on issues of multiculturalism and identity diversity.

Byram (2020) developed the intercultural literature, which emphasises that foreign language learning should include the dimensions of attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, and critical cultural awareness. Cultural representations in textbooks should support the development of these aspects, enabling students to become not only fluent language users but also open-minded and tolerant global citizens.

Thus, the future development of EFL textbooks in Indonesia needs to consider integrating multicultural values more deeply and contextually. Textbooks can be used to promote cross-cultural understanding rather than simply conveying cultural content in a rigid context.

3. Criticism of Cultural Inequality or Bias

One of the key issues identified in studies is the imbalance of cultural representation or cultural bias in EFL textbooks used in Indonesia. The imbalance is evident in the dominance of Western culture, such as American or British culture, and the marginalization of local cultures and those outside the English-speaking world. This imbalance is both qualitative and quantitative in terms of the quantity of representations, as qualitative refers to how a culture is ideologically represented in literature and images.

Some studies explicitly criticize this bias. For instance, Ariawan (2020) and Ayu (2020) concluded that the target culture dominates almost all parts of the book, whether in the narrative, character names, setting, or value system. Local culture occurs only as an additional or complementary context, playing a minor role in content development. This creates an imbalanced cultural hierarchy, making students consider foreign cultures more "worth learning" than their own.

Mustofa and Martina (2019) criticized the imbalance of cultural representation in two different textbooks. They found that in both books, Indonesian culture is given insufficient attention, both in terms of quantity and depth. When local culture is represented, it is often stereotypically portrayed, such as through traditional dances or typical foods, without providing an enriching social or historical context. Meanwhile, Setyono and Widodo (2019) employed a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach to expose the ideological bias concealed in the text. They found that government textbooks attempt to insert values of nationalism and tolerance, but remain within a homogenous dominant cultural framework and do not actively promote cultural diversity or intercultural equality. In many aspects, the books represent Indonesia as a single culture and do not give sufficient space to minority groups or regional cultures.

Kailola (2017) also highlighted that the global EFL book "English in Mind" used in Indonesia tends to emphasize foreign culture without considering the local user context. This shows an epistemological dependence on Western culture in developing teaching materials. Such textbooks are culturally biased and fail to build cognitive and affective bridges between students and the material being studied.

Cultural inequality or bias in EFL textbooks can have long-term negative impacts, such as cultural inferiority, loss of local identity, and students' failure to develop healthy intercultural competence. This is in line with Kramsch's (1998) criticism that the dominance of the target culture in foreign language teaching can create "cultural subordination" and identity dissonance in learners from non-Western backgrounds.

Pedagogically, culturally biased textbooks fail to support language learning as a cross-cultural communication tool. Textbooks that only represent the target culture without providing space for reflection on students' own or other cultures will limit the development of students' intercultural sensitivity, one of the most critical competencies in language learning in the global era.

4. *Intercultural Approaches in Textbooks*

The intercultural approach in EFL textbooks is an essential highlight in this study because it is directly related to the broader goal of foreign language learning, which is to help students comprehend as communicators who can interact sensitively and reflectively with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. This approach emphasizes the development of cultural awareness, skills in understanding and interpreting cultural differences, and the ability to think critically about cultural representations.

From the synthesis of the eight studies, it was found that the implementation of the intercultural approach in EFL textbooks in Indonesia is still limited and sporadic. Some textbooks do contain elements of foreign, local, and national cultures, but the packaging has not fully supported the intercultural dialogue process. It can be demonstrated in Sulistiyo et al. (2021) and Mustofa & Martina (2019) that the textbooks analyzed primarily represent culture through surface-level information, such as food, clothing, tourist attractions, and common habits. Students are not encouraged to reflect on cultural meanings, make intercultural comparisons, or assess the socio-cultural impact of a practice. In other words, the approach used is more monological than dialogic, which makes it less effective in developing intercultural competence entirely.

However, Setyono and Widodo (2019) demonstrated an effort towards an intercultural approach, albeit in a limited form. Government textbooks represent values such as tolerance, solidarity, and diversity, but these representations are not always integrated with learning activities that encourage students to interpret, compare, or discuss cultures critically. This suggests that intercultural approaches have not been systematically integrated into the pedagogical structure of textbooks. Meanwhile, Hasnah et al. (2024) highlighted that some local textbooks have begun to introduce local cultural content in a more contextualized manner, for example, through daily dialogues or folktales. Despite the existence of local cultural content, learning activities rarely prompt students to reflect on the meaning of these cultures or compare them to others. In contrast, Kailola (2017) assessed that "English in Mind" as a global book has extensive coverage of foreign cultures, but lacks space for local students to relate their own experiences. This suggests that global books tend to overlook the two-way intercultural approach, instead emphasizing the one-way transfer of the target culture.

Theoretically, the intercultural approach in foreign language learning, as proposed by Byram (2020), emphasizes the importance of developing five main components. They encompass an attitude of openness and curiosity, as well as cultural and social knowledge, skills in interpreting and comparing cultures, interaction skills, and critical cultural awareness.

However, these five components have not been explicitly integrated into the textbooks analyzed.

The lack of intercultural approaches in Indonesian EFL textbooks has implications for students' limited exposure to diverse cultural perspectives, as well as limited space to form inclusive and open cultural identities. Textbooks should provide culture not only as information, but also as an object of exploration, reflection, and discussion that can strengthen students' capacity to participate effectively in a multicultural and global society. Thus, the development of EFL textbooks in Indonesia must shift from a simple cognitive approach to a comprehensive intercultural strategy that includes activities promoting cross-cultural comparisons, intercultural conversations, and critical evaluation of cultural representations.

5. *Limiations*

This thematic synthesis has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the review integrates only eight qualitative studies conducted between 2016 and 2025, which narrows the evidential base and may not capture the full scope of research on cultural representation in Indonesian EFL textbooks. Second, the search relied primarily on openly accessible databases (e.g., Google Scholar and DOAJ), increasing the risk of selection and publication bias and potentially overlooking relevant studies indexed elsewhere or in non-indexed local journals. Third, the included studies vary in analytic frameworks (e.g., CDA, content analysis, checklists) and educational levels, producing methodological heterogeneity that complicates direct comparison across findings. Fourth, as a qualitative synthesis, the present study emphasizes interpretive integration rather than quantitative effect estimation. Consequently, it cannot indicate the magnitude of cultural dominance or imbalance across textbooks. Fifth, coding and theme development were derived from published reports whose depth and transparency vary, and the synthesis depended on the original authors' operationalizations, limited access to raw data, and occasional lack of inter-rater reliability reporting in the source studies, which may affect validity. Sixth, focusing on Indonesian contexts and English-language publications may limit transferability to other settings and languages.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative synthesis of eight studies offers critical insights into how cultural content is represented in Indonesian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbooks. The thematic analysis identified four major themes. They are the dominance of target cultures, superficial representation of cultural and multicultural values, cultural imbalance and bias, and the limited application of intercultural approaches.

The findings consistently show that EFL textbooks in Indonesia tend to represent Western (British and American) cultural influences heavily. At the same time, local and international cultures are often underrepresented or represented simplistically. Although some textbooks have begun integrating Indonesian cultural content, these efforts are usually fragmented, lacking depth, and rarely related to broader intercultural learning objectives.

Multicultural values are frequently conveyed through normative or moralistic narratives rather than critical reflection or dialogic engagement. Cultural imbalance and bias in textbook content not only undermine local cultural identity but also risk reinforcing a hierarchy where foreign cultures are viewed as superior. This undermines efforts to promote intercultural competence and global citizenship. The limited use of intercultural techniques reduces learners' opportunities to compare, reflect, and engage meaningfully with cultural diversity.

These findings suggest a critical need for developing culturally inclusive and pedagogically reflective English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbooks. Educational policymakers, curriculum developers, and textbook writers must expand beyond surface-level cultural representation and integrate intercultural education frameworks into their material development. Based on Byram's (1997) model of intercultural competence, textbooks should cultivate learners' attitudes of openness, cultural knowledge, comparative skills, interaction abilities, and critical cultural awareness.

In a multilingual and multicultural country like Indonesia, language education must be both globally relevant and locally grounded. EFL textbooks have the potential to be used not only as tools for language learning but also as platforms for promoting inclusive identity formation and intercultural understanding. Integrating these dimensions is essential for preparing learners to participate effectively and ethically in a globalized world.

Finally, curricular reforms and textbook revisions after 2025 may transform the landscape of cultural representation, reducing the temporal generalizability of these conclusions. Future research should broaden the search strategy, include grey literature, apply mixed-methods designs (e.g., combining CDA with quantitative content metrics), and examine classroom enactment to connect textbook representations with learners' intercultural outcomes.

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