

Analysis of Cultural Representation in English Language Books for the Merdeka Curriculum of Secondary School

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes cultural representation in English-language books used in the Merdeka Curriculum for secondary schools. Using a descriptive qualitative approach and content analysis method, this study examines three textbooks officially published by the government. The first book is *Think Globally Act Locally: English for Grade X*, the second is *Bahasa Inggris untuk SMA/MA Kelas XI*, and the third is *English for Grade VIII*. The analysis results indicate that foreign cultures, especially Western cultures, dominate Indonesian culture, which appears in a limited manner and is often not contextualized deeply. The representation of culture in these books is often only symbolic and fails to explore existing cultural values thoroughly. This imbalance has significant potential to influence the formation of students' cultural identity and weaken their understanding of Indonesian cultures. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen the content of local culture in English textbooks to promote learning that is more contextual, inclusive, and reflective of national values.

Keywords: *cultural representation; textbook; English language; merdeka curriculum; local culture*

INTRODUCTION

Language and culture are two things that cannot be separated because every use of language will always carry values, norms, and perspectives for its speakers. Learning English involves not only linguistic aspects but also cultural aspects. In the context of learning English as a foreign language, English textbooks play a central role as a source of learning materials. Textbooks in English learning not only present linguistic structures but also provide elements of values, attitudes, and the identity of a culture for the learners. Therefore, cultural representation has become a crucial issue in English education.

The Merdeka curriculum introduced by the Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology aims to provide more flexible learning resources, focusing on students and appreciating local contexts and cultural diversity. English textbooks as learning tools should reflect this spirit by presenting a balanced representation of regional, national, and international cultures. This shows that there is hope that the teaching and learning process can serve as a means to strengthen and introduce local and national cultures without neglecting international cultures, which are also very important in the 21st century, where cultural representation is crucial for shaping and strengthening students' intercultural awareness and national identity amid the increasingly rapid tide of globalization.

However, several studies indicate a tendency for Western culture to dominate the English textbooks used in Indonesia (Wido, 2018; Septiyana et al., 2022). Local culture often appears only symbolically and receives little space for meaningful exploration in narratives and teaching activities. This imbalance can hinder the development of students' intercultural potential and diminish their appreciation for local cultural values. Furthermore, very few studies analyze English textbooks in the context of the Merdeka curriculum, as this curriculum has just been implemented, especially at the secondary school level.

Textbooks, as one of the instruments for curriculum implementation in schools, play an important role in

integrating cultural elements into the teaching and learning process. As an ideological medium, textbooks can potentially shape students' thinking patterns about cultures deemed important to learn (Apple, 1992). Therefore, the representation of culture in English textbooks needs to be analyzed to determine how well these books can represent cultural diversity.

Based on this, this study aims to analyze culture representation in English textbooks, especially for junior and senior high schools that use the Merdeka curriculum. The focus of the study will cover the types of culture displayed (local, national, and international), forms of presentation (text, images, and activities), and the proportion of representation. This research is expected to contribute to the development of more inclusive and contextual English learning materials and support the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum that favors the diverse Indonesian culture.

METHODS

A qualitative descriptive approach with content analysis was chosen for this study because it was considered most appropriate for the research objectives: to identify and describe the forms and trends of cultural representation in Merdeka Curriculum English textbooks used at the secondary school level. The qualitative descriptive approach enables researchers to explore the meaning of textual and visual data—such as dialogues, narratives, illustrations, and images—and the structure and content of textbook learning themes. This approach aligns with the characteristics of qualitative research, which emphasizes understanding the context, meaning, and interpretation of social and cultural phenomena, rather than merely measuring numbers or statistics (Khoeriah, 2024), E-Journal Sean Institute.

Similar research was conducted by Ningrum (2025), who examined the representation of cultural context in the English for Change textbook for high school students in the Merdeka Curriculum. She applied qualitative content analysis supported by simple quantitative analysis to evaluate how target, source, and international cultures are presented in the textbook.

As explained by Krippendorff (2004), content analysis is a systematic and objective research technique for analyzing the content of messages. In this study, content analysis is used to trace and interpret how culture—whether local, national, or international—is represented in the content of textbooks. Krippendorff emphasizes that content analysis is not merely about counting the frequency of words or symbols, but also about uncovering the meanings embedded within texts and images, including ideologies, values, and dominant narratives that may not be explicitly visible. As such, this method is highly relevant for analyzing textbooks as cultural products that are not neutral and are laden with value-laden content.

The selection of textbooks as an object of study cannot be separated from their central role in the educational process, particularly in English language learning at the secondary school level. Textbooks serve as a source of learning material and an ideological tool that conveys specific social and cultural values to students. As Apple (1992) points out, textbooks are representations of knowledge constructed, selected, and legitimized by certain societal powers. Apple highlights that curricula and textbooks reflect dominant groups' political and economic interests. Therefore, analyzing cultural representation in textbooks is not just about “what” is taught, but also ‘why’ and “how” the information is selected and presented. This perspective encourages researchers to analyze the content descriptively and critically question the dominance of specific cultures and unequal or marginalized representations.

Furthermore, Kramsch (1993) states that language cannot be separated from culture in foreign language learning. He introduces the concept of “cultural linguistics,” which places culture at the center of cross-cultural communication. Language is not merely a tool for communication but also a medium for conveying culture. Therefore, when someone learns English, they not only study its grammatical system and vocabulary but also the values, norms, and ways of thinking inherent in the culture of its native speakers. In the context of the English language textbook for the Merdeka Curriculum, it is important to analyze to what extent Indonesian local culture is accommodated, contrasted, or even marginalized in foreign

language learning.

Using Kramsch's framework, researchers can examine cultural dimensions in texts, such as representations of identity, social relations, and worldviews. These artistic representations can appear through reading topics, characters in dialogues, illustrations, vocabulary choices, and the social context used in learning activities. For example, the use of foreign names such as John, Mary, or Michael in various social situations that are not contextualized with local Indonesian culture may indicate the dominance of Western culture. Conversely, if local names such as Budi, Siti, or Made are found in authentic and meaningful contexts, this may reflect an effort to represent local culture in foreign language learning.

In its implementation, content analysis in this study was carried out in systematic stages. First, the researcher collected data in the form of three Merdeka Curriculum English textbooks used at the junior high school and high school levels, namely: "Think Globally Act Locally: English for Grade X," "English for High School/MA Grade X," and "English for Grade VIII." These three books are textbooks published by the government and widely used in various secondary schools in Indonesia, making them highly relevant for analysis.

Second, the researcher identified all elements in the textbooks that contained potential cultural representations, whether in the form of text, images, dialogues, exercises, or narratives. These elements were then coded to classify the types of cultures represented, whether they were local cultures, national cultures, international cultures (in general), or foreign cultures (particularly Western).

Third, researchers analyzed patterns of cultural representation based on predetermined indicators. This analysis not only recorded the frequency of each type of culture but also paid attention to the context and quality of its presentation. For example, local culture may only appear in one or two images, but if the presentation is contextual and meaningful, it has a high representational value. Conversely, even if foreign cultures appear more frequently, their presentation is stereotypical or superficial; it must be critically examined.

Fourth, the analysis results are linked to the theories described earlier. Krippendorff's theory is used to understand the symbolic and ideological meaning of the textbook content. Kramsch's theory helps to examine the relationship between language and culture and its impact on learner identity. Meanwhile, Apple's theory critiques the power structures and ideologies that may be hidden behind the content choices in textbooks. Combining these three theories enables the research to comprehensively and critically analyze cultural representation in English books.

With this approach, this study aims not only to describe the book's content superficially but also to explore hidden narratives and the implications of these cultural representations on forming students' identities, strengthening national values, and readiness to participate in a global context. This aligns with the spirit of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes contextual, inclusive education that prioritizes character development and local wisdom.

Overall, using a descriptive qualitative approach with content analysis as the primary method allows this study to view textbooks as complex cultural products rich in meaning and not value-neutral. By analyzing how culture is represented, this research can contribute to the development of textbooks that are more culturally fair, relevant to the local context, and capable of facilitating English language learning that is not only linguistically effective but also culturally sensitive.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Finding 1: Cultural Representation in the Book *Think Globally Act Locally: English for Grade X*

An analysis of this book shows that Western culture dominates almost all of the content. This is evident in the use of characters, city names, and conversation examples, which are mostly taken from the context of life in Western countries. However, some insertions of local Indonesian culture, such as illustrations of tourist attractions or traditional foods, are not presented in depth. This situation causes students to interact more with texts emphasizing global cultural values, especially from the Western world, rather than the local culture they

experience daily.

Finding 2: Cultural Representation in English Textbooks for Senior High School/MA Grade XI

This book shows an effort to present elements of Indonesian culture, for example, by introducing national figures and certain cultural activities. However, local content is still limited and does not compare to the amount of material that highlights foreign cultures. Most texts, conversations, and readings still use a Western background, such as modern lifestyles, global trends, and stories from international figures. This makes the diversity of Indonesian culture only present as an addition, not as a central part of the learning material.

Finding 3: Cultural Representation in English Books for Grade VIII

In this book, the dominance of foreign culture is also clearly visible, even though there are some efforts to introduce local culture to students. Local culture appears in simple descriptive text examples or mentions of regional names, but is not expanded upon with meaningful narratives. Conversely, foreign culture is presented in a more varied form, ranging from international folklore, the lifestyles of foreign societies, to Western-style illustrations. This book's limited representation of Indonesian culture underscores that students are still more focused on understanding global culture than national culture.

Table 1. Cultural Representation in the Book Think Globally Act Locally: English for Grade X, Textbooks for Senior High School/MA Grade XI, English Books for Grade VIII

No	Book Title	Indonesia local culture	Western culture	Other international cultures	Total appearance
1.	Think globally act locally: English for grade X	18(24%)	49(66%)	7(10)	74

2. Bahasa Inggris untuk SMA/MA kelas IX	22(28%)	50(64%)	6(8%)	78
3. English for grade VIII	25(31%)	46(57%)	10(12%)	81
Total	65(28%)	145	23(10%)	
		(62%)		

Description:

Frequency counts include cultural content occurrences in texts, dialogues, illustrations, and exercises. Classification is based on categories of Indonesian local culture, Western culture (native English-speaking countries), and non-Western international culture.

Discussion

The findings of this study show the dominance of Western culture and the limited representation of local culture in Merdeka Curriculum English textbooks. This condition aligns with the research by Jayanti and Mustofa (2023), who found that in interactive books for the Merdeka Curriculum, the target culture (English-speaking countries) accounts for approximately 55%, while Indonesian local culture accounts for approximately 24%, and international culture accounts for approximately 21%. This view is reinforced by Alfaya, Rochsantiningsih, & Sumardi (2023), who state that in the Work in Progress textbook for grade 10, the target culture is dominant (50.9%), while the source culture is only 13.8% and the international culture is 15.5%.

The dominance of Western culture in English language learning materials is also consistent with the concepts of Anglocentrism and cultural imperialism. Anglocentrism refers to the tendency to view the world through the perspective of British/American culture, often disregarding other cultural perspectives. Phillipson (1992), through his theory of linguistic imperialism, highlights how the dominance of the English

language accompanies cultural dominance, which influences curricula and teaching materials in various postcolonial countries. This situation indicates that textbooks can reproduce dominant cultural ideologies and narrow the artistic scope of teaching materials.

Furthermore, in line with the findings of Putra, Rochsantiningsih, & Supriyadi (2023), although there is cultural representation, intercultural interactions often appear fragmented and superficial. This shows that although the book includes elements of other cultures, their depth and relevance are minimal in comprehensively building students' intercultural competence.

This imbalance has important educational implications. Byram (1997) emphasizes the importance of intercultural communicative competence in language learning: the ability to understand and appreciate other cultural perspectives. Suppose textbooks present the dominance of foreign cultures without balance or local context. In that case, students risk being exposed to Western culture as the primary norm and viewing their culture as unimportant or inferior.

In the context of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes contextual, inclusive learning and the strengthening of national identity, symbolic representations of local culture (e.g., mere illustrations of traditional food or clothing without in-depth explanations) are insufficient to achieve the curriculum's objectives. The presence of local culture in teaching materials should be more than just visual ornamentation; it should be articulated through narratives, dialogues, and deep reflection (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999).

In response, curriculum publishers and textbook authors need to apply the principle of cultural balance: presenting local culture with context and values as a central part of the material, not as an afterthought. Teachers also need to supplement the material with additional content that highlights local culture more contextually and reflectively, for example, through discussions about social values, history, and cultural practices. This will strengthen cultural authenticity and support the development of students' cultural identity and intercultural competence.

CONCLUSION

This study found that cultural representation in Merdeka Curriculum English textbooks for secondary schools still shows a dominance of foreign cultures, particularly Western culture, while Indonesian local culture is underrepresented. The presence of Indonesian culture is mainly symbolic, such as mentioning names of figures, places, or traditions, without contextual explanations that could deepen students' understanding. This imbalance could influence the formation of students' cultural identity and reduce their appreciation of national cultural diversity. Referring to the theory of intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997) and the concept of linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992), this condition indicates the need for improvements in textbook development so that English language learning can function not only as a bridge for global communication but also as a means of strengthening local cultural identity.

Based on the research findings, several important recommendations can be considered to improve the quality of cultural representation in English textbooks under the Merdeka Curriculum. First, textbook authors and compilers must enrich teaching materials with more varied, in-depth, and authentic local cultural content, including cultural products, daily practices, and value perspectives that reflect national identity. This aligns with Azhary's (2024) findings, which emphasize that integrating local culture into learning materials promotes student engagement and strengthens intercultural literacy (Azhary, 2024). Second, teachers have a strategic role in complementing the limitations of textbooks by providing additional teaching materials based on local wisdom, either through reflective activities or cross-cultural projects. A study conducted by Ratri et al. (2024) shows that using local culture in English language learning can enhance students' motivation, positive attitudes, and cultural understanding, particularly in the Southeast Asian context. Third, policymakers need to

ensure that the principle of cultural diversity is made a mandatory indicator in the future evaluation and development of textbooks, so that learning materials not only emphasize linguistic aspects but also strengthen students' cultural identity and awareness. A systematic review conducted by Ratri and Tyas (2024) also emphasizes that incorporating local culture into English teaching materials is a strategic step to foster intercultural awareness and broaden students' learning experiences. Thus, collaboration between textbook authors, educators, and policymakers will enable the creation of English language learning that is not only adaptive to global demands but also contextual, inclusive, and reflective of national values.

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