

SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTENT IN ENGLISH TEXTBOOK: A TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Socio-cultural content in textbooks help EFL teachers to prepare students to be global and local English speakers. Therefore, the proportion of the socio-cultural aspect in English textbooks should be distributed appropriately, whether local or intercultural. This study aims to understand Indonesian English teachers' perspective on the socio-cultural content in English textbooks. This study is a mixed-method case study, involving 15 experienced English teachers. The data is collected through a questionnaire, distributed through WhatsApp by adhering to convenient sampling techniques. Data were analyzed following descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. This study highlights the critical role of cultural education in English language teaching, underscoring its functions in enhancing linguistic proficiency and also fostering intercultural competence. Participants recognize the value of integrating both local and intercultural content, with a strong preference for locally relevant materials that resonate with students' cultural backgrounds. However, this study also stresses the importance of flexibility in utilizing textbook materials. The researcher acknowledges that the limited number of participants hinders the ability to generalize the findings to a wider context. Future studies should involve more participants from a wider context and also investigate students' perspectives or conduct classroom observations to deepen the study's overall impact.

Keywords: *English textbook, socio-cultural content, teachers' perspective*

INTRODUCTION

In an era marked by rapid globalization, the need for educational paradigms that transcend mere linguistic competence has become increasingly critical. As the world becomes more interconnected, it is essential for language education to encompass a broader understanding of socio-cultural nuances (Bagea, 2023). Hence, in response to this global shift, scholars have advocated for the replacement of traditional English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) models with the concept of English as an International Language (EIL) (Adityarini, 2007; OECD, 2020). EIL refers to the utilization of English as a medium of communication among people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Smith, 1976). This paradigm emphasizes not just the functional use of English, but also its role in fostering intercultural dialogue and understanding—described as being descriptive, reformative, functional, non-artificial, intervarectal, cross-cultural, universal, multicultural, and intercultural (Kachru, 1982; Smith, 2015).

Therefore, the process of teaching English extends beyond the mechanics of the language itself; it inherently involves the transmission of cultural values and practices; recognizing that language and sociocultural elements are inextricably intertwined, each shaping and reflecting the other. As Kramsch (2014) aptly articulates, language serves as the expression, embodiment, and symbol of cultural reality. Consequently, when learners engage with English, they also navigate and negotiate the cultural dimensions embedded within it (Doganay et al., 2021; Gui & Kew, 2023). The inclusion of diverse cultural contexts within English language teaching materials, such as textbooks, thus becomes crucial in cultivating these competencies.

As textbooks are the most widely used educational resources, it is necessary for teachers to meticulously select appropriate teaching materials for their students. This is because, as noted by Yamada (2006), a textbook is not merely a reference book; it also serves as a critical tool for conveying political and ideological orientations and can be examined as curricular materials projecting images of society and culture. Therefore, teachers need to select the learning materials thoroughly as textbooks not only provide material conditions for teaching and learning but also define and transmit what is considered elite or legitimate culture (Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991).

Scholars such as Cortazzi and Jin (1999), Hatoss (2004), and Teo and Kaewsakul (2016) have emphasized the importance of including cultural content in textbooks for fostering students' intercultural communicative competence. Studies corroborate this notion, mentioning that exposure to diverse cultures through textbooks significantly prepares students for effective communication in an increasingly interconnected world (Pangestu et al., 2023). It is also found that cultural content within learning materials enhances students' ability to interact appropriately and effectively with individuals from different cultural backgrounds (Ariawan, 2024). This exposure cultivates awareness of cultures beyond their own and deepens their understanding of socio-cultural contexts and nuances. Furthermore, through the cultural content in learning materials, it enables students to compare and reflect on their

own culture in relation to others, fostering a more comprehensive and empathetic worldview (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999; McKay, 2002; OECD, 2020; Tomalin, 2008). The inclusion of cultural content in textbooks has also been shown to positively impact student engagement, enriching their overall learning experiences (Kiczkowiak, 2022).

Considering the importance of incorporating cultural materials in textbooks, the strong correlation between textbook content and student learning underscores the critical need for thorough textbook evaluation. For teachers, evaluating textbooks ensures that the materials used are comprehensive and balanced, adequately addressing both language focus and also cultural contexts. Studies on textbook evaluation within the Indonesian context have yielded varied results. Silvia (2014) asserted in her thesis that there was a content imbalance between local and international sources, with a greater emphasis on local cultural depictions. Ariawan's (2024) study also found that Indonesian culture is the most prominent culture represented in the textbook while target culture and international target culture rarely appear. On the other hand, research by Faris (2014) and Rahmawati (2020) highlighted that only a small proportion of cultural content is included in some textbooks. Specifically, in the case of Indonesia's cultural context, the majority of cultural representation in senior high school textbooks is derived from the target language, English, and other international cultures.

The varying results discussed have sparked a long-standing debate regarding which cultural content should predominantly appear in English textbooks. On one hand, some scholars, such as Byram (1989), argue that language teaching should be as authentic as possible. This means incorporating cultural content from native English-speaking countries to provide students with genuine contexts and usages of the language. On the other hand, there is a strong argument for the inclusion of local cultural content. Faris (2014) suggests that embedding local culture within English textbooks is more beneficial, as it familiarizes students with their own cultural context while using English as a vehicle to convey these cultural elements. This approach helps students to see the relevance of English in their own lives and makes learning more relatable and engaging. A study by Floris (2013) supports this perspective, indicating that local content sourced from local publishers provides teachers with the most accessible and relevant textbook material. This relevance enhances the learning experience for both teachers and students, as the materials are more aligned with their socio-cultural environment.

While the debate over which cultural content should dominate English textbooks has been ongoing, there remains a notable gap in research regarding teachers' perspectives on this issue. Despite the extensive discussions and studies on cultural representation, the views and preferences of teachers—who play a crucial role and the frontrunner in implementing these materials—have not been thoroughly explored. Therefore, this study aims to bridge this gap by diving into the socio-cultural content of textbooks from the perspective of Indonesian English teachers. By gaining insights into their experiences and opinions, this research seeks to better understand how cultural content in textbooks can be optimized to enhance both linguistic and cultural learning outcomes for students.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a mixed-methods approach to investigate the perspectives of Indonesian EFL teachers on the socio-cultural content present in English textbooks they use in their teaching activities. Case study design is chosen to conduct an in-depth examination of Indonesian EFL teachers within their specific socio-cultural and educational context (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The case study approach allows the researcher to delve into the complexities and particularities of the teachers' perspectives on textbook content.

Quantitative data are collected through a questionnaire distributed to a diverse sample of Indonesian EFL teachers. The quantitative data aims to statistically analyze teachers' perspectives on various socio-cultural elements within the textbooks. The questionnaire includes Likert-scale questions that quantify teachers' opinions and attitudes, facilitating the identification of trends and patterns. Conversely, the qualitative aspect of the research is conducted using open-ended questions included in the same questionnaire. This qualitative data allows for a deeper exploration of the teachers' individual experiences, thoughts, and reflections regarding the socio-cultural content.

The questionnaire used in this study was developed by adapting questions from prior research focused on teachers' understanding of cultural elements in teaching, specifically studies by Silalahi (2016) and Noviyenty et al. (2020). To reach the participants, questionnaire invitations were sent via WhatsApp. These invitations provided a brief overview of the study's objectives and included a link to access the questionnaire on Google Forms.

Data collection employed a convenient sampling technique (Golzar et al., 2022). A total of 15 English teachers participated in the study. Among the respondents, 11 had more than 3 years of teaching experience, 2 had over 10 years of experience, and 1 had only 1 year of teaching experience. This diversity in experience levels provides a comprehensive view of various perspectives on the socio-cultural content of textbooks.

For the quantitative data, a descriptive analysis was utilized to summarize and interpret the numerical data derived from the questionnaire responses. This process involved calculating frequencies, means, and standard deviations to identify prevalent trends and patterns. For the qualitative data, thematic analysis was conducted, following the framework established by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2022). This technique involved coding the open-ended responses to identify recurring themes and patterns.

FINDINGS

The findings reveal that Indonesian EFL teachers recognize the importance of learning the culture of the target language, though it is not their highest priority. While understanding international cultures is essential for students to relate to the origin of the language, the teachers prefer locally relevant content.

Existence of local and intercultural contents in textbook

The survey reveals that while intercultural content is heavily featured in English textbooks, local content still holds a significant presence, albeit with a notable imbalance favoring intercultural content.

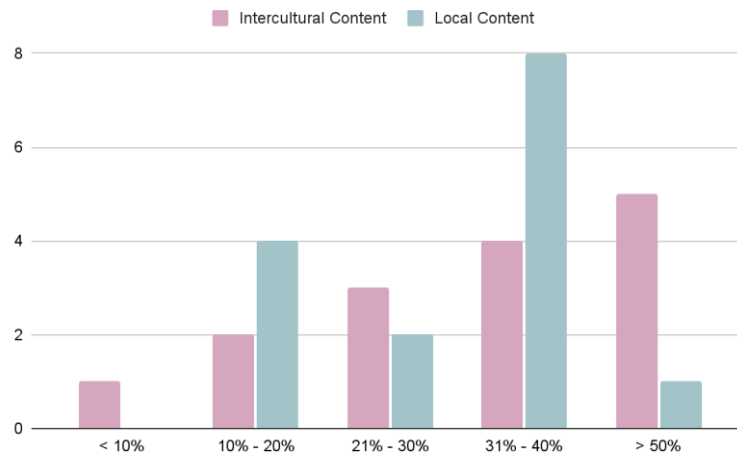


Figure 1. Distribution of local and intercultural contents in textbooks

The findings on the distribution of local and intercultural content in English textbooks, as reported by teachers, reveal some notable trends. The majority of teachers indicated that the intercultural content in textbooks exceeds 50%, with five teachers supporting this view. In contrast, only one teacher reported a similar percentage for local content. Conversely, the local content was most frequently reported to be within the 31% - 40% range, with eight teachers indicating this level, highlighting a significant difference compared to the five teachers who noted the same percentage for intercultural content.

Interestingly, local content in the 10% - 20% and 21% - 30% ranges was reported by four and two teachers, respectively, showcasing a somewhat even distribution. In comparison, three teachers observed intercultural content within the 21% - 30% range, and two teachers within the 10% - 20% range. Only one teacher mentioned intercultural content being less than 10%, while no teachers reported local content in this range.

Teachers' perspectives on the significance of cultural education

Based on the data collected, the findings reveal a strong consensus among teachers regarding the importance of teaching both local and intercultural cultures.

Table 1. Participants perception on the importance of teaching culture

	Not at all (1)	Slightly (2)	Moderately (3)	Very (4)	Extremely (5)	N	Mean	SD
"How important do you think it is to teach both local and intercultural cultures?"	0	0	0	6	9	15	4.6	0.49

Out of 15 respondents, 6 teachers (40%) believe that teaching cultures is very important aside from teaching language skills, while 9 teachers (60%) consider it to be extremely important. Notably, none of the teachers indicated that teaching local and intercultural cultures is "not at all," "slightly," or "moderately" important. This consensus highlights the significant value that respondents place on cultural education within their teaching practices. The results suggest a strong commitment among English teachers to incorporate both local and intercultural cultural elements in their teaching practices, reflecting an acknowledgment of the importance of cultural awareness and diversity in education.

The rationale behind this commitment among participants is clear from their responses. As T5 and T14 stated:

"Learning a language, in particular English does not mean you just focus on rules because spoken English includes culture". (T5)

"Teaching our culture or even western or other cultures will increase students' awareness and tolerance". (T14)

These perspectives highlight the belief among teachers that integrating cultural education into language teaching not only enhances linguistic proficiency but also promotes empathy, understanding, and respect for diverse cultures.

Teachers' perception of local and intercultural contents in textbook

The data reveals a strong preference among teachers for incorporating more local content in English textbooks.

Table 2. Participants perception on textbook's content

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)	N	Mean	SD
Do you think English textbooks should have more local content than intercultural or target language culture content?	0	0	3	7	5	15	4.13	0.74

From the data, it is evident that there are no teachers who strongly disagree or disagree with the inclusion of more local content. A minority of teachers (3) are neutral on the matter, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. However, the majority of teachers support the inclusion of more local content, with 7 teachers agreeing and 5 teachers strongly agreeing. This distribution indicates a clear trend that most teachers express a positive inclination towards having more local content in English textbooks, highlighting the importance for enhancing the relevance and engagement of English language learning for students in Indonesia.

This statistical data is further reinforced by the open-ended responses provided by participants:

"To introduce our local cultures, so the students will always remember their identity and their culture. The principle of 'think globally and act locally' should be instilled in the heart of students". (T3)

"There are some benefits to having local/cultural content in the English textbooks, such as the students will be getting used to the local culture, it also makes the student easier to understand the topic because it related to the student's background/social environment, the student also can directly use and implement it in the social functions". (T9)

"Since the content is familiar to students, students could apply the vocabulary they get in their daily life. This helps students to easily develop their vocabulary range". (T13)

These responses highlight the teachers' belief that local cultural content in textbooks not only helps students retain their cultural identity but also makes learning more relatable and practical. This is because familiarity with local cultural elements allows students to connect their learning to their daily lives, thereby improving their vocabulary and comprehension through practical application.

Nevertheless, T2, who remains neutral on the matter, highlighted an important consideration in this discussion.

"I think this is not about which content is the best. It is more of what teachers can do with those materials, they can use it directly or they can adapt the materials to better suit the students". (T2)

T2 perspective underscores the flexibility and adaptability that teachers must exercise in effectively using textbook content. It suggests that the value of the content, whether local or intercultural, largely depends on the teachers' ability to tailor it to meet the diverse needs and contexts of their students. Therefore, while the inclusion of local content is important, its true effectiveness lies in how teachers implement and integrate these materials into their teaching practices.

Teachers' recommendation on topics in English textbook

In addition to the emphasis on more local content in English textbooks, the participants strongly believe that integrating topics about Indonesian traditional food and drinks, national figures, history, folklore, fairy tales or legends, and local wisdom into English textbooks is crucial for preserving students' cultural identity.

"National figures and the history of Indonesia should be in the textbooks because this will help students become patriotic and understand the struggle of those figures so that they respect them and be grateful". (T1)

“Content like Indonesian traditional cuisines will make the students realize how rich Indonesia is”. (T6)

“Indonesia is an archipelagic nation, thus rich of folklore, fairy tale, and legends which should be in textbook because those stories have Indonesian culture and students can learn from them. The stories are also engaging and fun”. (T11)

The answers from these teachers underscore the importance of integrating historical and biographical content in fostering a sense of patriotism and respect among students. Similarly, including food-related content also has the potential to improve students' appreciation for their cultural heritage. Additionally, stories such as folklore, fairy tales, and legends can help preserve cultural heritage and engage students by connecting their learning to familiar and enjoyable stories.

DISCUSSION

The findings that integrating cultural education into English language teaching not only enhances linguistic proficiency but also promotes empathy, understanding, and respect for diverse cultures are supported by the work of numerous scholars, including Cortazzi and Jin (1999), Hatoss (2004), Teo and Kaewsakul (2016), and others (Pangestu et al., 2023; Ariawan, 2024). This is because by exposing students to cultural content, teachers are able to develop students' awareness of cultures beyond their own, deepening their understanding of socio-cultural contexts. This exposure goes beyond mere language rules, allowing students to develop appreciation of the cultural aspects that influence language use. Additionally, incorporating cultural content in learning materials enables students to compare and reflect on their own culture in relation to others, fostering a more comprehensive and empathetic worldview. This practice not only enhances their intercultural communicative competence but also prepares them to engage effectively in a globally interconnected world.

Moreover, the findings indicating a preference among participants for incorporating local culture as the primary content in English textbooks align with studies by Faris (2014) and Floris (2013). This preference may be attributed to the benefits highlighted by Lin et al. (2002) and McKay (2002), who note that integrating local cultural elements into language teaching not only enriches students' understanding of their own customs and norms but also equips them to mediate between different cultures, a skill that is invaluable for practicing intercultural communication. Additionally, Saraswati et al. (2018) emphasize that the influence of local culture on intercultural communication is significant, as familiarity with local cultural contexts enhances oral cultural negotiation. Consequently, local culture is an essential component in the teaching of intercultural communication within English language classrooms, as cultural knowledge sheds light on similarities and differences across various cultures and later facilitates the negotiation process between speakers from diverse cultural backgrounds.

While the aforementioned preference on using more local culture as the primary source in English textbooks has garnered support from various scholars, it is crucial to consider the perspective shared by T2, who emphasizes that the focus should not be on determining the best content. Instead, it should be on what teachers can achieve with the available materials—whether they utilize them directly or adapt them to better meet their students' needs. This viewpoint aligns with Hall (2001) who asserts that educational materials should be designed to bolster students' confidence in their ability to communicate effectively, despite any challenges they may encounter. Therefore, as Tomlinson (1998) and Madsen and Bowen (1978) note, teachers should be able to make existing materials more relevant and motivating, and if the materials seem irrelevant or will cause disengagement from the students, teachers should adapt or create their own materials and tailor them to suit the students' levels and interests.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the critical role of cultural education in English language teaching, underscoring its functions in enhancing linguistic proficiency and also fostering intercultural competence. Indonesian EFL teachers recognize the value of integrating both local and intercultural content, with a strong preference for locally relevant materials that resonate with students' cultural backgrounds. This preference stems from belief on the importance of grounding language learning in familiar contexts to enhance engagement, comprehension, and cultural identity. However, this study also stresses the importance of flexibility in utilizing textbook materials. While the inclusion of more local content is widely supported, the ultimate effectiveness of teaching resources depends on how well teachers adapt and contextualize them to meet students' needs.

Despite the results of this study, the researcher acknowledges that the limited number of participants hinders the ability to generalize the findings to a wider context. However, this study can serve as a consideration for English teachers and textbook developers to include more local culture in their materials, as this type of content will benefit students by enhancing their language usage within their own daily life and culture. It is still essential to provide intercultural materials, as they broaden students' intercultural awareness. Future studies should involve more participants from a wider context and also investigate students' perspectives or conduct classroom observations to deepen the study's overall impact.

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