

Cross-Cultural Understanding in Language Classrooms: The Embedding of Culture in Indonesian English Textbooks

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Abstract

Textbook is an important element in learning language because they provide framework for the construction of values and beliefs. Given that textbooks are built upon certain cultural values and beliefs, it is not possible to teach language without teaching the culture. Several findings have found that English textbooks are written based on certain culture. Without careful examination and appropriate use of the textbooks, students might feel confused and end up adopting and using the language in the wrong context. Hence, this paper is intended to explain the reasons why English teachers should develop a broad cross-cultural understanding and how Indonesian English textbooks have embedded culture in their texts and images. To answer these purposes, the researcher uses qualitative descriptive method. Based on the analysis of the data, it is found that English teachers need the knowledge of different cultures, since it affects the lesson planning, teacher-student communication, and teacher-parent interaction, which are the major factors of students' success in learning. Moreover, it is found that Indonesian English textbook provided by the government mostly represents Indonesian culture. In conclusion, English teachers in Indonesia have to develop cross-cultural understanding because it has to be taken into consideration whenever they plan a lesson and interact with the students and parents. Furthermore, since Indonesian English textbook provided by the government still adopts local and national culture, teachers have to add more exposure to different cultures to the students, so they will not be surprised when they talk with English users from different countries.

Keywords: cross-cultural understanding, culture-embedment, English textbooks

Introduction

Textbooks play a crucial role in the language learning process as they serve not only as a source of knowledge but also as a framework for shaping values and beliefs. According to Widodo (2018), textbooks are more than a mere component in a curriculum; they are cultural and social artifacts that encapsulate specific values, norms, and ideologies. While it may not be the authors' explicit intent, textbooks function to instill values and beliefs, either directly or indirectly, in their users. These values and beliefs are rooted in the cultural context promoted by the authors and significantly influence students' thoughts and behaviors. In essence, students don't just acquire language skills from textbooks; they also gain an understanding of how to think, act, and participate in a cultural society

As the concept of culture encompasses a wide range of meanings, it is essential to establish a clear definition of culture to be used in this text. Moran (2001) characterizes

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culture as a dynamic way of life observed within a specific group, expressed through shared perspectives and practices that yield tangible outcomes. Within the context of English language learning, culture pervades every aspect of students' lives, influencing their thoughts, beliefs, and actions. Therefore, the culture under discussion in this essay constitutes a system of thoughts, values, and beliefs, demonstrated through products, customs, and behaviors within a particular society.

Because textbooks are inherently steeped in certain cultural values and beliefs, it becomes evident that language and culture cannot be separated. Effective comprehension of language messages requires a grasp of their cultural context (Syahri & Susanti, 2016). Culture is an explanatory factor for a speaker's context and, consequently, shapes the language they employ. Conversely, one cannot convey their culture without language. This is where language and culture intersect. Additionally, language has an impact on culture by influencing thought processes, while culture shapes language usage in communication (Hariyanto, 2013). Issues arise when educators attempt to separate culture from language learning. The primary objective of English language acquisition is the clear exchange of ideas with other English speakers. As noted by Syahri & Susanti (2016), cultural awareness is a fundamental component of communicative competence in English, encompassing the cultures of both native and non-native English users. Given English's global reach, misunderstandings regarding the cultures of native and non-native speakers can hinder effective communication and foster conflicts (Isnaini et al., 2019). In the Indonesian context, students are more likely to engage in English communication with fellow non-native speakers. Consequently, exposure to diverse cultures in English language learning is imperative, and textbooks serve as an excellent starting point.

In reality, a broad number of English textbooks has caused confusion for EFL teachers in choosing the most appropriate textbooks to be used in their classrooms. Some textbooks present texts that possess high cultural values that one has to understand in order to grasp the whole meaning of the texts. A research done by Hilliard (2014) shows that four English textbooks that are used in EFL countries display more than 80 percent of western culture in their texts, images, and audio materials. As established, the use of textbook influences the students' perceptions and understanding regarding culture explicitly and, more often, implicitly. Since Indonesia is a country that places English as a foreign language, and at the same time, adopts eastern culture, English teachers in Indonesia have bigger responsibility in choosing and using the right textbooks. Without careful examination and use of the textbooks, students might feel confused and end up adopting and using the language in the wrong context. Therefore, this paper suggests two research questions: (1) Why should English teachers develop a broad cross-cultural understanding? (2) To what extent have Indonesian English textbooks embedded culture in their texts and images? This paper aims to help English teachers in Indonesia to understand the importance of cross-cultural understanding and how it affects their teaching practices using textbooks in the classes.

Literature Review

Cross-cultural understanding has been a prominent topic discussed in language learning. According to Knutson (2006), language classrooms serve as the meeting point for different cultures, significantly influencing teaching methods. Additionally, solely emphasizing the ability to speak English based on grammatical rules, without grasping the context in which the language is used, can lead to misinterpretations that may cause conflicts (Prodromou, 1992).

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Consequently, English educators must prioritize acquiring a comprehensive understanding of diverse cultures.

Culture impacts the learning in various ways. The first thing is the learning media. Pratt-Johnson (2006) claim that students from the eastern culture learn effectively through the use of visual-auditory media like movies and auditory means like podcasts and direct lectures. This is because of the oral tradition that people from the eastern culture maintain. The second one is the learning materials. The materials with western culture more likely promotes values like freedom and individuality that can sometimes be taboo in the eastern culture. The third thing that is being impacted is the learning methods. In countries that adopt eastern culture, students are more comfortable with using teacher-centered approach. Teachers are seen as the ones who hold full authority and therefore, should be respected. It happens because eastern culture has hierarchical systems (Fang & Gopinathan, 2009).

Culture also affects how teacher and students communicate in learning. Eastern culture is known for its concept of face, which makes students uncomfortable being criticized directly in front of others. What works better to communicate feedback is through written comments (Mostafaei & Forough, 2021). On the other hand, people from western culture see feedback as something good because it shows how others respect them (Pratt-Johnson, 2006). Therefore, they are comfortable addressing problems directly. In terms of nonverbal communication, there are cultures that value politeness through facial expressions, so maintaining smile and eye contact is very important (Mostafaei & Forough, 2021). In Korean, the opposite is true. There is a proverb, "the man who smiles a lot is not a real man" (Pratt-Johnson, 2006). From these examples alone, it is clear how different values that each culture holds onto.

According to Moran (2001), there are five dimensions of culture. The first one is product. Things like concrete artifacts, places, and traditional clothes are the example of it. The second one is practice. It is shown in the rituals and acts of the society who lives in a certain culture. Thirdly, there is cultural perspective, which is pretty much abstract concepts, beliefs, and ideas. Fourth is the community, including the ceremonies and groups where the members of the society can do the cultural practices. Lastly, there is the personal dimension of culture, which talks more about the life of personal member of the community. With those five dimensions, the differences in culture can be seen in the English textbooks provided by the Indonesian government for secondary level. Mostly, the images shown in the textbooks represent Indonesian culture as a religious community (Qodriani & Kardiansyah, 2018). At the same time, values of gender roles that still exist in Indonesian community are also represented in the conversations, texts, and images in the textbooks.

Method

Because the focus of this research is to analyze the importance of cross-cultural understanding for Indonesian English teachers and how culture is embedded in the textbooks, the researchers use the qualitative descriptive method. The data is collected through extensive literature review with the phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2013). After collecting the data, the researchers analyze the data using the data analysis proposed by Miles & Huberman (2014). It is done by comparing one source to the other sources to find the similarity and the differences among them, eliminating the same data to get the relevant data, and creating a conclusion that answers the purpose of this study. When presenting the data, the researchers always refer back to the previous results of the studies mentioned before in the literature review. The reason for this is to support the result of this study or to suggest new findings.

Reflecting on the previous studies, this method is proven to be an effective way to gain information regarding cross-cultural understanding and its embedment in English textbooks.

Findings and Discussion

Understanding cross-cultural dynamics is crucial for English teachers because they often find themselves in multicultural classrooms, which significantly shape their teaching methods and interactions. As emphasized by Knutson (2006), language classrooms serve as a space where different cultures converge, deeply influencing instructional approaches. This paper will explore this concept, focusing on the importance of cross-cultural understanding for teachers when it comes to lesson planning, verbal and non-verbal communication with students, and engagement with parents. To provide context, the discussion will specifically address the context of teaching English in secondary schools where both Indonesian and non-Indonesian students share the same classroom. In summary, culture plays a profound role in shaping lesson planning and communication among teachers, students, and parents in multicultural classrooms, underscoring the need for English teachers in secondary schools to cultivate cross-cultural competence.

The primary reason behind the needs for English teachers to acquire cross-cultural understanding lies in the huge influence cultural beliefs and traditions has on three key aspects of lesson planning. First, there is the matter of learning media. Learning media, such as movies, podcasts, and lectures, are more commonly favored by students from Eastern cultures due to their strong oral traditions (Pratt-Johnson, 2006). In contrast, those from Western cultures tend to rely more on written sources for acquiring information. The second aspect is the selection of learning materials. English teachers must carefully assess the cultural underpinnings of textbooks and consider the diverse cultural backgrounds of their students. In contexts where Indonesian students are present, it may be necessary to explicitly address certain beliefs propagated by Western culture. Lastly, there are the teaching methods. Eastern culture often leans towards teacher-centered approaches, where educators hold significant authority, influenced by hierarchical systems (Fang & Gopinathan, 2009). In contrast, students from Western cultures thrive in student-centered classrooms that emphasize individualism. Therefore, English teachers in the context previously described must find a balance in their methods to cater to both cultural perspectives. These disparities across the three dimensions clearly demonstrate the profound impact of culture on lesson planning. Without a comprehensive understanding of students' cultural beliefs and traditions, teachers may struggle to meet their diverse needs in terms of learning media, materials, and methods.

Furthermore, English teachers must possess cross-cultural understanding to effectively communicate with their students. In verbal communication, for instance, students from Eastern cultures often prefer not to receive direct criticism in front of their peers, as it can cause them to "lose face." Even if they maintain a smiling facade, they may take the critique personally. Therefore, it is advisable for teachers to provide personal written feedback or general feedback. Similarly, addressing interpersonal conflicts through face-to-face meetings is preferable in Eastern cultural contexts (Mostafaei & Forough, 2021). Conversely, students influenced by Western culture are generally comfortable with addressing problems directly, as they view disagreements as opportunities for innovation (Pratt-Johnson, 2006). What they find disrespectful is being discouraged from expressing different or contradictory ideas. They also appreciate direct comments on their work, making direct oral feedback acceptable. Teachers must understand these cultural distinctions to communicate effectively with their

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diverse students. Beyond verbal communication, culture also plays a role in non-verbal communication. Some cultures express politeness through smiling and maintaining eye contact while speaking (Mostafaei & Forough, 2021). However, in other cultures, excessive smiling can convey carelessness. For instance, Koreans have a saying, "the man who smiles a lot is not a real man" (Pratt-Johnson, 2006). Teachers unaware of these cultural nuances might misinterpret the behavior of their Korean students as impolite. Conversely, Korean students might feel perplexed when repeatedly asked to smile by their teachers. In summary, teachers require cross-cultural understanding to minimize miscommunication between themselves and their students.


In addition, English teachers should also interact with parents who hold their own cultural beliefs, further giving more importance to the cross-cultural understanding. Davitishvili (2017) suggests that the more diverse the cultural backgrounds within a given setting, the stronger the impact of these cultures on the interaction process. Consequently, English teachers instructing both Indonesian and non-Indonesian students face a bigger challenge. For instance, Western parents may engage in confrontational communication when they disagree with the teacher's decisions. Teachers unfamiliar with Western culture may interpret this as a personal attack rather than a critique of ideas. Furthermore, parents have their own expectations regarding their children's behavior in the classroom. Western parents may encourage their children to express their opinions freely, viewing it as a success if their children develop creative thinking and voice their thoughts (Greenfield et al., 2000). Teachers who lack understanding of this cultural aspect may perceive these students as overly dominant. Conversely, parents from Eastern cultures may instruct their children to show respect to teachers by speaking less. However, teachers often expect students to actively participate in class discussions, leading to a clash between the parents' cultural norms and the teachers' expectations. This misalignment can result in dissatisfaction on both sides concerning the students' development. In conclusion, English teachers need a solid grasp of cultural differences when interacting with parents to maintain effective communication and ensure consistency in the cultural values upheld by both teachers and parents for the students' educational progress.

Given that culture exerts a comprehensive influence on the educational process and interactions, English teachers bear the responsibility of familiarizing themselves with diverse cultures. Instructing both Indonesian and non-Indonesian students demands proficiency in English, pedagogy, and cultural awareness. Cultural understanding is intrinsically intertwined with these competences. The aspects discussed in this paper, lesson planning, teacher-student communication, and teacher-parent interaction represent critical determinants of students' success in their learning journey. Given that culture impacts all of these aspects, cross-cultural understanding is significant. Acquiring this understanding need not be confined to firsthand experiences of living in other countries. As the world continues to advance, English teachers have access to a broader array of online resources and opportunities for cross-cultural learning. In light of these considerations, there are no valid excuses for English teachers in secondary schools to neglect the development of cross-cultural understanding.

In connection with different cultural backgrounds of the teacher and the students, it is also important to take a look at how Indonesian English textbooks have embedded culture. An illustrative case of how limited exposure to both the target culture and international culture is evident in English textbooks can be found in "*When English Rings a Bell*," a textbook distributed by the Indonesian government and utilized by seventh-grade students in numerous public schools across Indonesia. This textbook predominantly emphasizes Indonesian culture

as the primary source culture. For instance, within one of its chapters, a grammar review discusses the use of active and passive voice with the sentence, "People see peace in family as essential for spiritual growth." This sentence serves as a reflection of how Indonesian culture places significant value on spirituality and familial ties. Given Indonesia's collectivist nature, the majority of Indonesian parents raise their children within a religious community (Qodriani & Kardiansyah, 2018). A harmonious family relationship is considered evidence of one's spirituality. This stands in contrast to Western culture, where parents often grant their children the freedom to choose their religious beliefs. Individual presentation plays a more substantial role in measuring spirituality in Western culture, rather than reliance on one's family. This initial example reaffirms the assertion that culture plays a significant role in shaping language and its usage.

Figure 1: Culture in textbook



PASSIVE VOICE

	Subject	Verb	Object
Active	Mary	helps	her son
Passive	The son	is helped (to be + V3)	by Mary

Active	People see peace in family as essential for spiritual growth.
Passive	Peace in family is seen as essential for spiritual growth.

Source: Khatimah et al. (2014)

Another instance highlighting the representation of culture and gender roles can be observed in a conversation involving Santi, Bayu, and Riri as they discuss their weekend plans. This dialogue reflects the prevalent stereotypes in Indonesian society that associate outdoor activities with men and indoor activities with women (Yonata & Mujiyanto, 2017). In the text, Santi intends to spend her weekend at home, while Riri plans to bake cookies. In contrast, Bayu is going fishing with his father. On the other hand, western culture has witnessed a growing awareness and sensitivity to gender-related issues, reflected in educational materials advocating for both genders to engage in a wide range of activities regardless of traditional gender roles (Yonata & Mujiyanto, 2017). This example aligns with the earlier statement that language plays a pivotal role in shaping thoughts. In this case, it molds students' perceptions of gender roles, illustrating how language constructs these views.

Figure 2: Culture in textbook

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- Santi : Uhm, I'm not sure. I don't have any idea yet. I think I might stay at home.
- Bayu : Stay at home? Well, you could do something more interesting!
- Santi : So, what about you Bayu? Do you have any plans?
- Bayu : Definitely! **My dad and I are going to** go fishing.
- Santi : Fishing? Are you going to go fishing in the river near your house?
- Bayu : No. We plan to go fishing in a lake near my uncle's house. **Would you like** to come with us?
- Santi : Fishing? That sounds great. But I would rather stay at home than go fishing.
- Bayu : What about you, Riri? **What would you like** to do on the long weekend?
- Riri : I have made a plan with my mother about what to do on this long weekend. We **are going to** practice baking cookies.

Source: Khatimah et al. (2014)

In conclusion, incorporating elements of the source culture into English textbooks is not inherently wrong. However, it should not be the sole focus. It is imperative that students are exposed to cultures different from their own to prepare them for interactions beyond their immediate community. The good news is that teachers have control over the texts and educational materials used in their classrooms. They can teach English while introducing students to diverse cultures, which is beneficial for their future endeavors. Despite the existence of government-provided textbooks, it is better for English teachers to also explore and utilize a variety of resources. They should view the inclusion of foreign cultures in textbooks as an opportunity to expand students' horizons rather than a threat to their cultural identity. For example, when encountering a text that challenges traditional gender roles, teachers can engage students in discussions about their beliefs and values, fostering a more natural, contextual, and comprehensive approach to English language learning.

Conclusion

Culture is a broad concept to be discussed. However, it is an important thing, since it affects every aspect of human life, including education. Classrooms are where different culture come together. It gives a solid reason for teachers to start learning about different cultures. English teachers have even bigger responsibility, since language and culture cannot be separated. In planning the lesson, culture affect three things: the learning media, learning materials, and learning methods. In interacting with the students, culture determines how feedback and comments should be delivered, how conflicts should be resolved, how teachers should present their nonverbal communication. Besides that, English teachers also need to consider cultural differences when interacting with the students' parents because of the different parenting styles in each culture. By having cross-cultural understanding, English teachers can anticipate cultural beliefs that might contradict the beliefs and values that Indonesian society has, or on the other hand, they can help the students to understand cultures that are different from theirs. One of the examples exist in the textbooks that they use in class.

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Based on the analysis of the English textbook published by the Indonesian government, it can be seen that the texts and images still reflect local and national culture. If students only learn English within Indonesian society context, they will most likely be surprised when they encounter communication with English speakers from other countries. Therefore, this paper recommends Indonesian English teachers to expose the students also to different cultures of English-speaking countries, while keep discussing how they are accepted and rejected in certain contexts.

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