

An Analysis of Foreign Cultural Values in an English Textbook: A Study in the English Literature Study Program

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Abstract

This study investigates foreign cultural values in a textbook used in an English Literature Study Program at a private university in Indonesia, focusing on the potential conflicts with Indonesian cultural norms and the perceptions of the lecturer and students towards them. The data were collected through documentation, semi-structured interviews with one lecturer and nine students, as well as a focus group discussion. The result of the analysis reveals several categories of foreign cultural values that contrast with Indonesian norms, including social relations and lifestyle (e.g., open dating and party culture), politeness and norms (e.g., revealing clothing), everyday habits (e.g., gambling), religious references (e.g., Taoism), and worldview (e.g., direct expressions of hatred). Nevertheless, although these contents sometimes contradict Indonesian local values, the respondents acknowledged their value in enhancing their vocabulary, idiomatic competence, and contextual language understanding. The lecturer and students highlighted the importance of clarification and discussion to compare the differences between the target language culture and local culture, with the lecturer playing a crucial role in encouraging reflection. It was also found that the students demonstrated cultural filtering in accepting or rejecting foreign values based on several aspects, including religions, social norms, and family values. The study outlines that foreign cultural values in EFL materials should not be viewed as threats but as opportunities for cross-cultural understanding.

Keywords: EFL (English as a Foreign Language), EFL Textbook, English Language Learning, Foreign Cultural Values, Language and Culture

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji nilai-nilai budaya asing dalam sebuah buku teks yang digunakan pada Program Studi Sastra Inggris di sebuah universitas swasta di Indonesia, dengan fokus pada potensi konflik dengan norma budaya Indonesia serta persepsi dosen dan mahasiswa terhadap nilai-nilai tersebut. Data dikumpulkan melalui studi dokumentasi, wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan satu orang dosen dan sembilan mahasiswa, serta *focus group discussion*. Hasil analisis menunjukkan beberapa kategori nilai budaya asing yang bertentangan dengan norma-norma Indonesia, di antaranya hubungan sosial dan gaya hidup (misalnya budaya pacaran terbuka), kesopanan dan norma (misalnya pakaian yang terbuka), kebiasaan sehari-hari (misalnya perjudian), referensi keagamaan (misalnya Taoisme), serta pandangan hidup (misalnya ekspresi kebencian secara langsung). Meskipun demikian, walaupun konten-konten tersebut terkadang bertentangan dengan nilai-nilai lokal Indonesia, para responden mengakui manfaatnya dalam meningkatkan penguasaan kosakata, kompetensi idiomatik, serta pemahaman bahasa dalam konteks. Dosen dan mahasiswa menekankan pentingnya klarifikasi dan diskusi untuk membandingkan perbedaan antara budaya bahasa sasaran dan budaya lokal, dengan dosen memainkan peran penting dalam mendorong refleksi kritis. Selain itu, ditemukan bahwa mahasiswa menunjukkan proses penyaringan budaya (*cultural filtering*) dalam menerima atau menolak nilai-nilai asing berdasarkan beberapa aspek, termasuk agama, norma sosial, dan nilai-nilai keluarga. Penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa nilai-nilai budaya asing dalam materi EFL tidak seharusnya dipandang sebagai ancaman, melainkan sebagai peluang untuk meningkatkan pemahaman lintas budaya.

Kata kunci: Buku Teks EFL, Bahasa dan Budaya, Nilai-Nilai Budaya Asing, Pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris, EFL (English as a Foreign Language)

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INTRODUCTION

Teaching materials are essential for effective learning and encourage students to be more engaged in the teaching-learning process. In foreign language teaching, apart from learner motivation and teacher competence, good textbooks also play a crucial role. Textbooks not only serve as instructional guides for teachers and students (Lestari et al., 2024) but also facilitate interaction (Arabacıoğlu, 2023). Additionally, textbooks are also important to provide students access to structured information that can support the learning process (Li et al., 2023).

However, language learning requires more than just mastery of vocabulary and grammar. It also requires an understanding of culture (Muhd Zulkifli et al., 2019), which may align with or even contradict local values. Culture is embedded in language (De Giosa, 2009), and one's identity is shaped through the interaction between language and culture. Foreign language proficiency can directly or indirectly influence a person's cultural identity and way of thinking (Puspitasari et al., 2024). Therefore, cultural learning cannot be separated from language learning (Dewi et al., 2020; Mukti et al., 2020; Syairi, 2013). Despite their different field of study, language and culture are closely related (Kuo & Lai, 2006). However, concerns persist: some fear that foreign language education might distance learners from their Indonesian identity, or worse, foster a form of "cultural colonization" under the banner of globalization and modernization (Santoso, 2014).

In foreign language teaching, lecturers tend to select textbooks that best support their instructional goals, either locally published or internationally produced. Meanwhile, many lecturers rely on international textbooks to ensure authentic exposure to the target language, particularly those teaching at the university level. Yet, these materials sometimes include cultural values that clash with Indonesian traditions. Students may unconsciously absorb such values, potentially altering their cultural orientation, diminishing their appreciation for local customs, and eroding cultural sensitivity. In the long run, such exposure risks eventually create an identity crisis among young Indonesians learning foreign languages without critical cultural awareness.

Previous research has examined the relationship between cultural and linguistic competence in textbooks (Rodríguez, 2015; Soto-Molina & Méndez, 2020) primarily by examining the presence and proportion of foreign cultural content. Rodríguez's study (2015), for example, focused generally on foreign cultural content without distinguishing whether such cultural elements aligned with or conflicted with learners' local cultural value. Meanwhile, Soto-Molina & Méndez (2020) emphasized intercultural awareness without addressing value incompatibility. Other studies in the Indonesian context have examined cultural representation in English textbooks (Angga Gunantar, 2017; Ardnyananisari & Ratri, 2024; Riadini & Cahyono, 2021), yet these works primarily highlight general representations of foreign and local cultures. However, these studies have not systematically identified foreign cultural values that contradict Indonesian sociocultural norms, nor have they examined how such contradictions are interpreted by lecturers and students. This study advances existing studies by identifying the values that contradict local cultural values as well as investigating how lecturers and students perceive these contrasting cultural values. The findings are expected to make a positive contribution to English language education in Indonesia by guiding lecturers to critically assess cultural content in textbooks and encouraging lecturers and students to adopt a more critical stance. In this way, students are trained not only to acquire linguistic competence but also to develop the ability to analyze foreign cultural values, enabling them to understand their wider cultural implications.

This study, therefore, seeks to answer two key questions:

1. What foreign cultural values in English textbooks conflict with Indonesian cultural values?
2. How do lecturers and students perceive the presence of such values?

The objectives are twofold: first, to identify foreign cultural values in English textbooks that contradict Indonesian culture, and second, to investigate how lecturers and students interpret and respond to these contradicting foreign cultural values. This study offers novelty beyond simply identifying cultural content, as it also explores lecturers' and students' perceptions of cultural representation in a textbook. The results are expected to inform the development of more contextual teaching materials and improve cultural literacy in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning in Indonesia.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design using content analysis to investigate the cultural values represented in English textbooks. Content analysis is appropriate for this research by constructing underlying realities and meanings. Furthermore, qualitative content analysis also allows researchers to interpret textual and visual data systematically (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, triangulation of research instruments was used (Cohen et al., 2017), including documentation of foreign cultural values contained in the textbook, interviews, and a focus group discussion (FGD). Documentation involved a careful analysis of the textbook to identify examples of foreign cultural values – whether in text, images, or exercises – that may contradict Indonesian cultural values. The primary object of this research is the textbook "Academic Writing: From Paragraph to Essay," used in the Essay Writing course in the English Literature Study Program at a private university in Sumedang.

Additionally, interviews were employed to gain deeper insights into perceptions of the textbook's cultural contents. Interviews were conducted with one lecturer who taught the course and nine students enrolled in it. The participants were purposively selected to represent three levels of student performance in order to obtain a broader range of perspectives across different levels of English proficiency, namely low, intermediate, and high. The interview questions explored participants' opinions on foreign cultural values presented in the textbook, whether these values contradict Indonesian local culture, their attitudes toward such contrasting cultural values, whether they perceive them as useful for learning, and how they filter or negotiate these values. In addition, a focus group discussion (FGD) was conducted to explore wider perspectives from the respondents. Group interaction in the FGD provides an opportunity for the respondents to express their beliefs, opinions, and values that might not have emerged during individual interviews in a more interactive setting. The data collected from documentation, interviews, and FGD were analyzed to answer research questions. They were, then, categorized and interpreted based on relevant theories.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Foreign Cultural Values in the Textbook

The content analysis of the "Academic Writing: From Paragraph to Essay" textbook, supported by interviews and FGD, revealed multiple instances of foreign cultural representations, primarily Western in origin. Some of these values align with Indonesian norms, but others appear

to be in conflict. The conflicting values were grouped into several categories: social relations and lifestyle, politeness and norms, everyday habits, religion and worldview. Risager (2007) emphasizes that, in general, English materials conceive a source of culture representation which may conflict target culture of the language learners, which in turn, triggers culture conflicts.

From social relations and lifestyle aspects, students highlighted practices such as first dates, living with host families, and party culture as inconsistent with Indonesian norms, which are generally more conservative. In the FGD, they emphasized that living with non-family members felt unfamiliar, as they are used to living with family members or staying in a lodge house. Open dating was even more problematic as it implies a pre-marriage relationship, which is still debatable within local culture. The lecturer noted that 'party culture' is frequently discussed in the textbook. Students also felt that the notion of free-flowing parties, as commonly seen in Western contexts, does not align with Indonesian local culture. Party culture was criticized as being incompatible with social expectations in Indonesia, where norms surrounding community approval and neighborhood harmony remain strong.

In politeness and norms, representations of sexy outfits or revealing clothing in public, as well as depictions of sitting postures such as crossing one's legs in front of elders, were considered inappropriate in the Indonesian context. Students noted that while clothing styles might be influenced by climate, standards of modesty in Indonesia remain stricter. Similarly, sitting postures considered casual in Western contexts could be perceived as disrespectful in Indonesia, particularly in intergenerational interactions. One interview respondent stated, "In Indonesia, some people say it is polite, while others say it is not. Those who consider it impolite usually note that it is inappropriate to sit in that way in front of older people." This statement highlights the diversity of perspectives on politeness within Indonesian culture. While some respondents were more permissive, others stressed the importance of context, particularly the presence of older individuals, in determining whether a behavior is acceptable. This reveals that culture conflicts may not only stem from big affairs, but as minor as details of everyday interaction, serving as one of the intercultural communication factors (Thahir, 2023).

In the aspect of habits, the content analysis found references to gambling activities, such as lotteries and casinos, which were rejected by both students and lecturers as being incompatible with Indonesian culture. Respondents pointed out that gambling is considered prohibited under religious teachings and socially unacceptable in their communities. In addition, depictions of giving objects with the left hand were noted as culturally impolite, reflecting another area of conflict between the textbook and local norms.

From the religious standpoint, mentions of Taoism within the textbook, presented without sufficient explanation, were perceived as potentially confusing for Indonesian students, most of whom are deeply rooted in religious traditions. While Taoism is identified as a part of philosophical views, students find it sensitive as it believes in worshiping spirits, which is against their beliefs. Without proper contextualization, such references risk misinterpretation and demand further clarification as the text contains foreign beliefs or values.

Finally, from a worldview aspect, certain illustrations depict frontal hatred expression, such as a cartoon of a mouse openly declaring hatred toward cats. These were viewed as contrary to Indonesian communication styles, which tend to favor indirectness and politeness in order to maintain harmony. This finding resonates with prior studies, noting that Indonesian

communication norms often avoid direct confrontation and prioritize maintaining social relationships (Muhammad, 2024).

In general, this book contains notable foreign cultural values that contradict Indonesian cultural values. Such values, nonetheless, might still be compromised through contextual explanation from the lecturers. This clash of values can also be a moment of reflection for students about their cultural identity, so that they have more awareness regarding the conflict of these values. In addition, exposure to foreign cultural values in the textbook can be interpreted as a form of tertiary socialization (Risager, 2007), in which learners encounter alternative interpretations of social life that challenge norms acquired through primary and secondary socialization. The students' discomfort with all the conflicted values shows the moment when the students socialize and relate the foreign values with the values what they have known in their previous environment. Therefore, they can be an object of critical reflection to enhance students' intercultural understanding rather than merely focusing on the negative impacts they might have on the students.

Perceptions of Lecturers and Students

The second objective of the study is to investigate lecturer's and students' perceptions of the foreign cultural values in the Academic Writing book. Despite acknowledging cultural conflicts, both lecturer and students emphasized the positive impact of foreign cultural content on language competence. Consistent with previous research (Harahap, 2024; Rodríguez, 2015), they argued that such exposure enhances vocabulary, deepens understanding of idiomatic expressions, and improves the ability to interpret texts in context. The lecturer highlighted the integration of language and cultural competence as integral and important features to language learning objectives, affirming the inseparability of language and culture (Dewi et al., 2020; Mukti et al., 2020). This also means that language learning should not only focus on linguistic aspects, but also intercultural understanding (Muhd Zulkifli et al., 2019; Rohmani & Andriyanti, 2022). Foreign cultural contents should not be regarded as additional, but rather, an integral aspect of language competence. Only then will they serve as cultural scaffolding, helping students acquire language in a more comprehensive manner.

In addition, foreign culture exposures help students acquire vocabulary, idioms, and communication in context (Namaziandost et al., 2021), even leading to what can be described as cultural filtering. They reported selectively accepting positive or useful values, such as idioms that promote discipline and foresight (e.g., "a stitch in time saves nine"). They identified it with time management in their study, showing that while some foreign values were problematic, their filtering alarms could still help them identify the ones that could be positively and relevantly internalized.

The study also found that the impact of foreign culture on students' point of view is divided into two sides. On the one hand, some students admitted that they became more open and liberal in their mindset, given the exposure to individualism and freedom. Others, on the other hand, having been exposed to local values in their upbringings, gave no room for their impacts. This indicates that the students have certain levels of cultural filtering mechanisms, i.e., the ability to filter foreign cultural values either accepted as an inspiration or rejected and avoided due to their seemingly negative sides. This was obvious during FGD. The students negotiated which to take or leave based on their religious, social, family, and logical filtering. However, the level of filtering may

vary from person to person. Some may emphasize religion, and some others might rely on their family upbringings. Interestingly, students recognized that social norms might differ from one place to another, e.g., consuming meat of certain animals might seem peculiar or even taboo in one society but common in another one. This depicts critical reflection and negotiating cultural identity in the exposure to foreign culture. Students' acceptance and rejection of cultural contents indicate an internalized cultural filtering mechanism, by which learners evaluate foreign values against pre-existing belief systems such as religion, family upbringing, and social norms. It also reflects Risager's (2007) concept of the world citizen, where learners participate in global linguistic and cultural processes while maintaining local identities. Thus, the acceptance and rejection, in this context, serve as acts of negotiation rather than cultural disagreement.

Another significant finding shows that both the lecturer and students found culture clarification and comparison as prominent features in language learning. The lecturer's role is deemed to be unparalleled in such a process. The students consistently highlighted the importance of these lecturers' clarifications of cultural content to avoid misunderstanding. Nearly all students in the FGD reinforced the significant impact of lecturers' explanations of cultural contents to help them understand foreign cultural contexts. Nevertheless, they stated that the decision to either take or leave its values comes from their attitude, family background, and religious beliefs. In this case, the lecturer needs a culturally critical awareness teaching strategy that gives students space to analyze, compare, and evaluate the cultural values in the textbook. The lecturer solely mediates its contents and clarification, provides a paradigm to interpret, and stimulates students' critical thought (Alshenqeeti, 2020). Through classroom discussion, lecturers can help students compare foreign cultural values to those of the locals, highlighting intercultural understanding. In this sense, the lecturer does not determine whether the students accept or reject the cultural values, but scaffolds students' interpretation by providing contextual explanation to avoid misinterpretation and also reduce culture shock.

The study also found that the students stressed the importance of balance between both foreign and local cultural contents in the textbook. This finding supports the results reported by Toprakçı and Özyıldın (2020). Similar to their study, this study also confirms that the exposure to foreign language culture is perceived by the lecturer and students as beneficial for language learning, particularly providing authentic language exposure to vocabulary enhancement, idiomatic knowledge, and communicative competence. Nevertheless, students agreed that these should be complemented with local materials to reinforce cultural identity. The lecturer supported the stance while emphasizing the international publication at a university level, with its root source and origin. A blended approach – integrating both international and local perspectives – was seen as the most effective way to support linguistic competence without sacrificing national identity. This reflects the transnational approach to language learning proposed by Risager (2007) which affirms that global participation does not necessarily abandon local or national identity. Risager argues that intercultural competence develops through integration, not replacement of cultural elements.

Overall, the study shows that foreign cultural values in the textbook should not be seen as a threat, but as an opportunity for cross-cultural understanding. It mediates vocabulary enrichment, contextualization, and intercultural understanding. Yet, the challenge comes when it encounters local values. After all, students are proven to have a sense of filtering mechanism based on religion,

culture, and experience. Lecturers play a pivotal role in reinforcing students' critical capacity so as not to take the contents pointlessly, but rather critically reflect upon their positive side. In so doing, the integration of authentic materials and local contexts serves as a pedagogical strategy to both meet the needs of global competence and national identity reinforcement.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results and discussions above, it can be indicated that English language textbooks containing foreign cultural values offer both challenges and benefits for EFL learners in Indonesia. Certain cultural values may conflict with Indonesian local traditions, but these can also enrich students' linguistic competence and cross-cultural understanding. In addition, the students demonstrate that they apply cultural filtering mechanisms to negotiate which values to adapt or reject based on several aspects such as religion, family values, and social norms. Meanwhile, the lecturer has provided essential guidance for the students through contextual explanations and comparisons of target and local culture. These findings revealed that rather than excluding foreign cultural contents in textbooks, EFL instructors should discuss them with students to enrich students' global competence and encourage intercultural learning without undermining national identity. This strategy allows students to foster cultural awareness but still maintain their Indonesian cultural values. The implication for English textbook writers is that they should include local context or add intercultural explanations so that readers do not misinterpret the contents of the textbooks.

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