

Cultural Content Integration in EFL: Examining Pre-Service Teachers' Material Development

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ABSTRACT

Language learning cannot be separated from cultural elements, because besides serving as a means of communication, language also reflects social practices, values, and perspectives. Integrating cultural content into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning materials is crucial for improving students' intercultural skills and equipping them with the skills to build good communication in various contexts. However, previous research has revealed that cultural content is underrepresented or often neglected in language learning, where linguistic competence is emphasized over reflecting culture. This study aims to examine the extent to which pre-service teachers integrating cultural content, including source culture, target culture, and international culture, into the EFL materials they develop. This study uses a qualitative design with content analysis methods to analyze how culture is represented in English as a foreign language (EFL) learning. This study analyzed English language learning materials developed by pre-service teachers for phases A, C, D, E, and F. The results showed that the English language learning materials developed by pre-service teachers mostly discussed the source culture and neglected international culture. The imbalance in the representation of cultural content in English language learning materials can affect students' intercultural skills. This study suggests the need for future research to examine cultural themes depicted in English language learning materials developed by pre-service teachers using different cultural frameworks.

Keywords: cultural content, English learning materials, pre-service teachers

INTRODUCTION

Culture is an important aspect of language learning. Cultural aspects influence language learning, especially English (Hossain, 2024; Trang & Anh, 2022; Tuna & Razi, 2016). Culture and language have a reciprocal relationship, where language not only reflects the culture and social reality of a society but also influences a person's behavior, point of view, and mindset (Susianti et al., 2024). This shows that culture is crucial role on the English learning process in the classroom and learners are expected to be able to recognize diverse cultures with mastery of English. Consciously, this becomes the foundation for developing tolerance and respect, as well as participating in new views and increasing student knowledge of their own cultural existence (Byram, 2013). Moreover, integrating culture in foreign language learning is a major target in language learning activities (Sadeghi & Sepahi, 2018). Furthermore, Weninger and Kiss (2013) reveal that culture has become a major issue in language learning. Recent studies support this idea, showing that English textbooks in Indonesia often contain uneven cultural representation, with the source culture dominating and the target or foreign culture receiving less attention (Agustina & Kencana, 2023; Setyono & Widodo, 2019). This suggests that examining cultural

content in English language learning materials is crucial for understanding not only how the language is taught, but also how cultural perspectives are introduced and maintained in the classroom.

Learning materials play a crucial role in shaping learners' language proficiency as the basis of information received and language application in the classroom (Tarrayo & Anudin, 2023). Materials can be experiential (giving the learner direct experience with the language used), instructional (guiding the learner in practicing the language), eliciting (encouraging the learner to use the language), or exploratory, and informative (informing the learner about the target language) (Tomlinson, 2012; Yusmei et al., 2022). According to Yusmei et al., (2022), learning materials are said to be experiential if they provide a description of the language used. Learning materials are classified as exploratory when they teach how language is used in real-life contexts; instructional when they facilitate language use for learners; and explanatory when they encourage active language use.

Learning materials not only facilitate language acquisition but also serve as an important medium for integrating cultural understanding, thereby building students' communication competence and intercultural awareness. According to Husain et al (2021) culturally integrated learning materials provide opportunities for students to communicate in the target language in ways that reflect its historical, contextual, and social aspects. When cultural perspectives are consciously integrated into learning materials, students are able to distinguish, reflect, and compare their own and others' cultural backgrounds, which can foster intercultural awareness (Trang & Anh, 2022). This cultural learning is crucial because language learning without cultural integration can produce students who are fluent in the language but lack sensitivity to cultural understanding (Aljuaid, 2024). Furthermore, incorporating cultural content into learning materials encourages the development of intercultural competence, which provides students with opportunity to adapt more proficiency to diverse cultural environments (Hicham et al., 2025).

Culture is fundamental to English learning materials. Young et al (2009) explain that culture is considered as an important concept in language learning and popular in English learning materials. Moreover, culture is also an essential component in English language learning materials because language is influenced by and reflects a culture (Aufa & Pusparini, 2024). Shin et al (2011) state that English learning materials should contain cultural background and the explanation and understanding given to students are diverse to avoid misunderstanding. The cultural content provided in English learning materials should diverse as a provision for students to establish good intercultural communication and increase empathy between one culture and another.

However, cultural content is often neglected and loaded unbalanced in language learning mainly in English classes (Zhang, 2024). The learning content that is limited in English learning is writing, speaking, reading, listening, grammar, and vocabulary, including cultural significance is ignored (Zhang, 2024). Tseng (2002) explains, in the ESL and EFL, culture is often sidelined or applied as an additional distraction. Furthermore, the results of research conducted by Rahmani (2018) and

Sari (2017) show that in learning materials, the cultural content presented is imbalanced and has an impact on student's intercultural competence. Thus, intercultural competence aims to empower foreign language speakers not only to understand their own culture background but also to adapt to the culture of the foreign language. Learning materials published by publishers mostly contain less interesting content, while cultural content receives less attention (Mustapidaturrohmah et al., 2022). According to Liu (2016), despite the diversity of textbooks, curriculum, and other English as a foreign language (EFL) learning media, there is still a lack of common criteria for introducing and representing culture in EFL classrooms. As a result, cultural learning in EFL classroom is often neglected and receive less attention.

Cultural content in learning materials is also a frequent topic of study (Bahri & Agustina, 2023; Faris, 2014; Masturah et al., 2021; Riadini & Cahyono, 2021). Some previous studies analyzed and found cultural content in English learning materials designed by professional material developers. For example, Bahri and Agustina, (2023) explore learning materials or textbooks entitled “Bahasa Inggris Tingkat Lanjut” created by Afrilyasanti (2021) and “English for Change” created by Astuti et al., (2022) published by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology using Cortazzi and Jin's (1999) framework. In the same background, Riadini and Cahyono, (2021) review a textbook entitled “English (revised edition)” published by the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic Indonesia in 2017 using Cortazzi and Jin's (1999) three sources of culture, and Byram's (1993) cultural contents framework. Faris, (2014) studied a textbook entitled “Look Ahead” written by Th. M. Sudarwati and Eudia Grace published by Airlangga based on cultural content categorized into 3 types of culture (target, source, and international culture) and the framework of four senses of culture (pragmatic, semantic, sociological, and aesthetic sense). Masturah et al., (2021) examined a textbook entitled “English on Target” based on cultural categories (international culture, free culture, target culture, and source culture) and five cultural dimensions (communities, products, perspectives, person's, and practices). Moreover, Ayu (2020) investigate English textbook created by Ministry Education and Culture in Indonesia that used by tenth graders based on cultural content categorized into three types (source, target, and international culture).

Teachers and pre-service teachers play a crucial role in developing English language learning materials, as they are responsible for designing materials that are linguistically, culturally, and pedagogically appropriate. In practice, teachers act as material designers, adapting, creating, and selecting activities aligned with curriculum objectives to complement the sociocultural context and linguistic needs of learners (Tarrayo & Anudin, 2023). In the teacher education system, pre-service teacher learns how to develop materials through microteaching, practicum experiences, and coursework that build competencies in content adaptation, integration of authentic language input, and need analysis (Baser et al., 2016; Li et al., 2023). This training also fosters critical thinking and creativity, providing opportunities for them to shape cultural perspectives in learning materials and design assignments that foster intercultural communication skills (Hicham et al., 2025;

Namaziandost et al., 2018). Therefore, early exposure to material design not only develops pre-service teachers' pedagogical skills but also prepares them to facilitate the growing demand for contextually and culturally appropriate ELT materials in a variety of classroom situations.

The aforementioned studies focused on investigating and analyzing the learning materials created by professional material developers. There is a dearth of studies delving into the learning materials developed by pre-service teachers. Therefore, the objective of this study is to analyze the extent to which pre-service teachers integrate cultural content into the learning materials they develop. This study examines pre-service teachers' activities in order to promote higher understanding and integration of cultural content in the construction of language learning materials.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This research used a qualitative research design with a content analysis approach that aimed to investigate the integration of cultural content in English learning as a foreign language. The qualitative content analysis approach focused on the component of the text by observing the meaning or contextual content of the text (Arusah & Laela, 2023). This approach allowed for studying the meaning contained in learning materials, not only in terms of how much cultural content appeared, but through interpretations of how culture was articulated, integrated, and represented in language learning.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data Description

The English learning materials used in this study were developed by pre-service teachers enrolled in the Learning and Materials Development course in the English Language Education Study Program at Esa Unggul University. The English learning materials consisted of five phases (A, C, D, E, and F) based on the official phases of the Curriculum Merdeka. All phases of English learning materials developed by pre-service teachers consist of four activities, namely listening, speaking, writing and reading activities. Each stage represents a specific grade level, from elementary school to high school. Each materials included images, tasks, and texts created by a team of three pre-service teachers. This division provided the researcher with a structured basis for observing how cultural content was integrated across different educational levels. The cultural content of these materials was then examined using Cortazzi and Jin (1999) framework, which divides cultural representations into three categories: source culture (the learners' own culture), target culture (the culture of English-speaking countries such as the United States or the United Kingdom), and international culture (the culture of other English-speaking and non-English-speaking countries).

Table 1 English learning materials developed by pre-service teachers

Criteria										
Phase	A	C	D-1	D-2	D-3	D-4	E-1	E-2	E-3	F
Page	29	19	16	14	22	21	14	22	13	15
	pages	pages	pages	pages	pages	pages	pages	pages	pages	pages
Authors	- M	- R	- A	- K	- D	- K	- S	- L	- A	- M
	- E	- R	- R	- R	- D	- N	- Y	- A	- I	- H
	- R	- R	- A	- A	- D	- S	- E	- E	- A	- M

Cultural Content Integration in English Learning Materials

The data in Figure 1 came from English learning materials for elementary school phase A. The data showed the cultural types of the English learning materials. "What's In My Bag?" presented more occurrences in the source culture with a total of 2 cases (100%). This strong emphasis reflected the tendency of pre-service teachers to structure the primary school curriculum around familiar and locally relevant situations. The choice of source culture at this level was understandable, as younger learners learned more effectively when examples related directly to their everyday experiences. However, the absence of target culture and international culture indicated a lack of intercultural experience. Students were not taught how similar issues might arise in English-speaking or other foreign environments. While emphasizing local culture at an early stage made learning more accessible, it also had the potential to narrow students' cultural horizons if later stages did not gradually incorporate broader cultural perspectives.

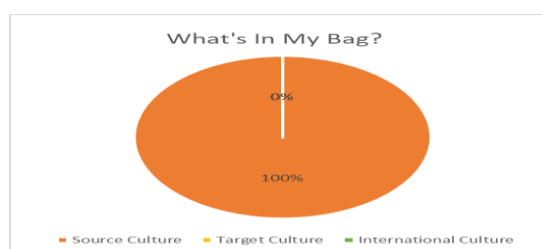


Figure 1 Cultural content of "What's in My Bag?"

In contrast, "Describing Things" featured international culture (50%) more often than source culture (33%) and target culture (17%). International cultural content appeared in three cases, reflecting pre-service teachers' efforts to educate children about objects and activities from other countries, particularly Japan. The incorporation of world cultures suggested that the designers sought to broaden students' horizons by providing examples beyond Indonesia and English-speaking cultures. The source culture was featured in two examples, which allowed students to connect the lesson to their own cultural backgrounds while remaining relevant to a familiar context. Meanwhile, the target culture was represented in only one example, which indicated that English-speaking cultural references were given less weight in this unit. Overall, the distribution of cultural types in this unit revealed that pre-service teachers felt more comfortable using global references from non-English-

speaking countries than incorporating content from English-speaking cultures. While this technique increased awareness of cultural diversity, it also showed that the balance between cultural categories remained uneven, with few opportunities for students to engage with the perspectives of the target culture.

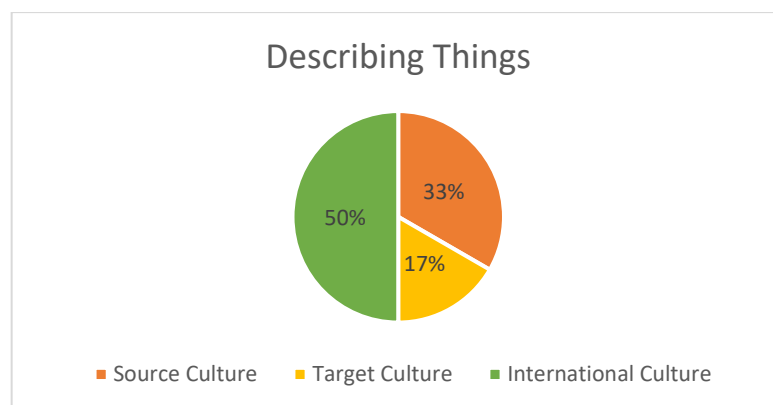


Figure 2 Cultural content of "Describing Things"

Figure 3 presented the types of culture in English language learning materials. The "Your Favorite Food" material emphasized the source culture (100%) for language learners. The source culture presented in the learning materials facilitated students' introduction to traditional foods rooted in their culture. On the other hand, "Your Favorite Food" ignores the target culture and international culture because it prioritized the source culture. This imbalance prevented students from comparing their own culinary cultures with a global perspective, which was essential for developing intercultural competence.



Figure 3 Cultural content of "My Favorite Food"

Similarly, "Describing Places" also focused entirely on the source culture (100%) presented to language learners. The source culture depicted in the English learning materials made it easier for students to recognize tourist attractions that were part of their own culture. However, "Describing Places" did not depict international or target cultures. Students were not facilitated to recognize and learn

about other cultures. This indicated that the material was entirely based on the source culture as the primary reference, without introducing cultural perspectives from English-speaking countries or a global context to learners. Such an approach simplified the learning process by connecting lessons to students' immediate surroundings, but it also limited their ability to explore how places portrayed and valued in other cultures. The absence of both the target and international cultures diminished the richness of cultural comparisons, which could have helped students broaden their worldview and develop intercultural awareness.

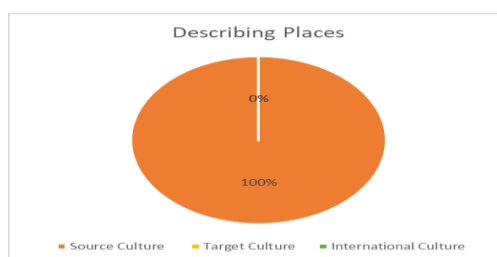


Figure 4 Cultural content of "Describing Places"

Figure 5 presents the types of culture in the English learning materials. "Hobbies and Interests" shows that international culture (100%) is more dominant. Students facilitated to learn about international culture involving India. Furthermore, the English learning materials "Hobbies and Interests" do not reflect the target culture or the source culture.



Figure 5 Cultural content of "Hobbies and Interests"

Figure shows the types of culture in English learning materials. "My Favorite Food" divides cultural content into source culture (50%), target culture (33%), and international culture (17%). Source culture appears three times, and target culture

appears twice. In contrast, source culture and target culture only appear once in the learning materials.

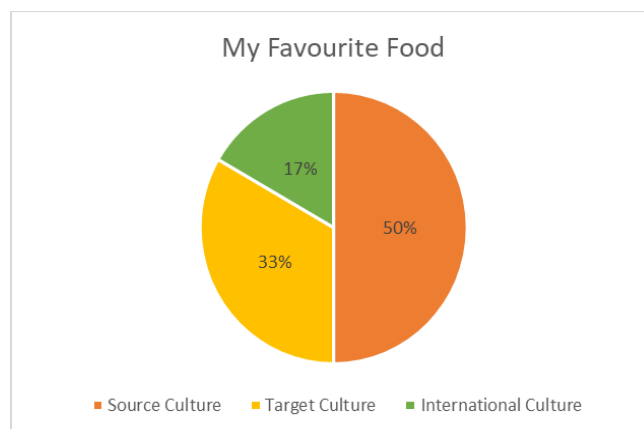


Figure 6 Cultural content of "My Favorite Food"

Figure 7 shows the cultural content presented in the English language learning materials. The "My Favorite Celebrity" material places a greater emphasis on the target culture (75%) than the source culture (25%). The target culture appears in 3 cases and the source culture in only 1 case. International culture is not represented at all in this learning material. This distribution suggests that the pre-service teachers who designed this material prioritized exposure to celebrities from English-speaking countries, which is consistent with the focus of the unit and the global appeal of these figures. The presence of source culture, while limited, reflects an effort to preserve local identity. However, the complete absence of international culture suggests that many global perspectives are being overlooked. Overall, these percentages indicate a cultural imbalance in which students are introduced to target culture figures while receiving little exposure to their own cultural icons and no opportunity to compare them to international examples.

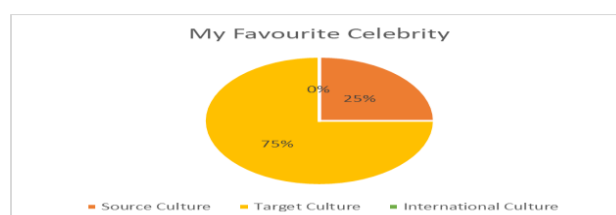


Figure 7 Cultural content of " My Favorite Celebrity"

Almost the same, "Sports Health" also emphasizes the target culture (67%) than international culture (33%). Source culture does not appear at all in this English learning material. This distribution suggests that pre-service teachers prefer cultural content from English-speaking environments, reflecting the influence of global health and lifestyle issues often associated with Western countries. The presence of

international cultures, although small in proportion, demonstrates an effort to introduce students to well-known global individuals and behaviors, broadening their understanding beyond the target culture. However, the lack of source cultures means students are not given the opportunity to connect health-related themes to their own local environments. This imbalance may limit the contextual relevance of the material for Indonesian students, despite providing them with valuable exposure to global and target cultural perspectives.

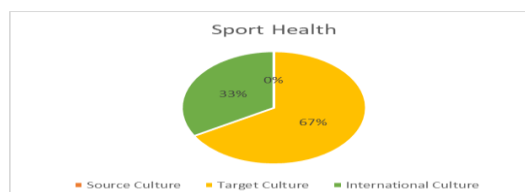


Figure 8 Cultural content of "Sport Health"

Figure 9 presents the types of culture in English language learning materials. "Holiday Destination" depicts the most dominant source culture (100%). However, "Holiday Destination" does not focus on the target culture or international culture. This distribution indicates that pre-service teachers structured the unit entirely around the Indonesian context, such as local tourist destinations and vacation experiences at home, to convey the learning material. While this decision made the topic more accessible and engaging for learners by incorporating common cultural tropes, it also presented a monocultural perspective. The lack of perspective on the target and foreign cultures meant that students were not given the opportunity to compare Indonesian destinations with those in English-speaking countries or other parts of the world. As a result, the course reinforced national identification while limiting intercultural exposure, a crucial component in developing students' global communication skills. This finding reflects a broader trend in the data, where pre-service teachers were confident in incorporating local cultural elements but hesitant or less adept at balancing them with the target and international cultures.



Figure 9 Cultural content of "Holiday Destination"

In contrast, "Enjoy in Tourism" depicts the source and target cultures as having equal occurrences (50%) and (50%). International culture, on the other hand, is completely absent from the lesson. This balanced proportion implied that prospective teachers aimed to provide students with both local and English-speaking

cultural perspectives on tourism. However, the lack of international culture indicated that the cultural coverage of the material was limited, as students were not exposed to tourism behaviors from a variety of global contexts. While a balance of source and target cultures could be helpful in comparative learning, the absence of international culture limited students' opportunities to develop greater intercultural awareness.



Figure 10 Cultural content of "Enjoy in Tourism"

CONCLUSION

The study analyze the type of cultural content in English learning materials develop by pre-service teachers for all phases (A, C, D, E, F) using analytical framework Cortazzi and Jin (1999) classify cultural content into source culture, target culture, and international culture. Based on the findings, this study concludes as follows:

1. The source culture dominated the English learning materials created by pre-service teachers. Most subjects, including Your Favorite Food, Describing Places, and Holiday Destinations, focused on Indonesian culture, food, and tourist sites.
2. The target and international cultures were underrepresented. The target culture appeared infrequently, usually through examples of Western cuisine or American celebrities, but international culture was represented only in unusual circumstances such as Japanese toys or Indian music.
3. This imbalance may reduce intercultural sensitivity. Prioritizing source culture encourages students' pride in their country identity, but it limits opportunities for developing international awareness and global communication skills.

The findings of this study have substantial implications for teacher education. Because pre-service teachers rely primarily on local cultural components, their learning materials often promote national identity while providing little opportunity for cross-cultural comparison. While this technique can make courses more engaging and relevant, it can limit students' understanding of how English is used in a global context. Pre-service teachers are encouraged to create materials that actively incorporate multicultural perspectives. It is recommended that teacher education programs encourage pre-service teachers to integrate multicultural content more systematically. By aligning the source, target, and global cultures, pre-service teachers can educate students not only to understand the language but also to communicate effectively across cultures.

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