

Cultural Themes in “English For Nusantara” Series of Textbook for Junior High School

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Abstract. This study examines the representation of cultural themes in the English for Nusantara textbook series for Indonesian junior high schools (Grades VII–IX). Using a qualitative descriptive design, the research applies content analysis based on Chen’s (2004) framework, which categorizes culture into big “C” (e.g., history, geography, politics, art, economy, traditions) and small “c” (e.g., daily routines, customs, food, values). The findings reveal a nearly balanced distribution between small “c” (51%) especially food and daily routines, reflecting students’ everyday experiences, and big “C” (49%) elements such as literature and history. However, the study emphasizes the series varies across cultural themes by grade level. Grade VII predominantly features small “c” themes, Grade VIII maintains a focus on small “c” culture while gradually introducing more big “C”. In contrast, Grade IX shows a clear shift toward big “C” themes, particularly geography and economy, indicating increased abstraction and global orientation. Overall, the series demonstrates a structured progression in cultural representation aligned with students’ cognitive and linguistic development.

Keywords: Cultural themes, big “C”, small “c”, EFL textbooks

1. INTRODUCTION

Culture is inseparable from language learning, as acquiring a language requires understanding the cultural contexts in which it is used [1]. In fact, language and culture are closely interconnected; being able to use a language also means understanding the perspectives, behaviors, and ways of life of its native speakers. They cannot be separated, especially in language learning and teaching, since cultural elements are inherently embedded within the language itself [2]. The strong link between language and culture can render foreign language learning less effective if the cultural context of the community where the language is used is not taken into account [3]. Therefore, intercultural education should be highlighted as an essential component of foreign language instruction [4].

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, textbooks play a central role in transmitting cultural knowledge and shaping learners’ perceptions of both the language and its users. Beyond serving as linguistic resources, textbooks act as cultural mediators that introduce learners to social values, traditions, and ways of life embedded in the target language [5]–[6]. Moreover, English as an international language is used by non-native speakers for a wide range of communication purposes. Therefore, textbook authors need to acknowledge this diversity and design materials that reflect it [7]. By incorporating learners’ own cultural backgrounds and experiences, textbooks can make it easier for students to relate to different varieties of English and use the language more effectively in real-life contexts [8], [9]. In addition, it can equip students with the knowledge and understanding needed to navigate both national and international life more effectively [10].

The integration of cultural themes in EFL textbooks provides meaningful contexts that support comprehension and promote intercultural awareness. The result of analysis of English textbooks reveals that they present a wide range of cultural representations and foster a deeper understanding of cultures beyond learners’ own [11]. The limited representation of local culture and the inclusion of cultural content presented without proper context have raised concerns about teachers’ understanding of culturally based norms and practices in textbooks, let alone their ability to support students in developing intercultural awareness in the classroom [12], [13].

Effective intercultural communication requires learners to develop an understanding not only of cultures in which English functions as a native language, but also of those where it serves as a second or foreign language. An exclusive focus on either the source culture or the target culture is insufficient for

the development of intercultural communicative competence [6]. Cultural content influences learners' perspectives and helps broaden their understanding of the world by exposing them to diverse cultural practices and viewpoints [14], [15]. Effective EFL textbooks therefore incorporate cultural materials from both local and global contexts, enabling learners to maintain their cultural identity while developing awareness of other cultures [16], [17]. However, to bridge this gap, teacher can also adapt textbooks to the local context by integrating elements relevant to their learners, primarily through the inclusion of local references [18], [19].

Given the significance of cultural representation, evaluating textbooks from a cultural perspective is essential in EFL contexts. Textbook evaluation allows educators to examine how cultural themes are selected and presented and whether they align with learners' cultural backgrounds and instructional objectives [20]. Textbooks for both first and foreign languages serve as the primary sources of historical, sociolinguistic, and literary knowledge in language teaching and learning [21]. Such evaluation frameworks help determine the suitability of textbooks across different educational settings by assessing the balance between source and target cultural content. Evaluating textbooks from an intercultural perspective, therefore, can offer valuable insights into what further steps are needed to support teachers in their efforts to teach intercultural competence in the classroom [22].

However, incorporating local culture into English language teaching offers meaningful context and a sense of familiarity, enabling learners to achieve more effective language learning as they can connect it to their everyday lives. When local cultural elements are included, students are more likely to engage with tangible and relatable content, which makes the learning process easier and more meaningful [23], [24].

Although existing studies have highlighted the importance of culture in EFL materials [25], [26], limited research has specifically examined the cultural themes embedded in EFL textbooks. In particular, the English for Nusantara textbook series, which integrates Indonesian and international cultural elements, differs from many commercial EFL textbooks that predominantly emphasize Western cultures. In this research context, cultural themes are conceptualized as the culture of the target language and are categorized into big "C" (big culture) and small "c" (small culture), following Chen's (2004) framework as cited in [27]. Big "C" culture refers to broader and more abstract cultural dimensions, including history, politics, geography, art and literature, and traditions and customs that characterize a society. In contrast, small "c" culture encompasses everyday and observable aspects of cultural life, such as daily routines, social customs and norms, cultural products, and shared values and beliefs. This distinction allows for a more systematic analysis of how culture is represented in language learning materials.

Using this framework, the present study focuses on examining the cultural themes presented in the English for Nusantara textbook series for junior high school students. Unlike many EFL textbooks that emphasize Western cultural perspectives, this series integrates both local and international cultural elements. However, the balance and prominence of big "C" and small "c" cultural themes within the textbooks remain underexplored. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the representation of cultural themes in the textbooks with the goal of contributing to the development of culturally responsive EFL materials.

2. METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to examine the cultural themes presented in the English for Nusantara textbook series for Grades VII, VIII, and IX used in Indonesian junior high schools. The primary method was content analysis of the textbooks, in which cultural themes were identified and categorized into big "C" and small "c" culture based on the framework adapted from Chen [27]. This analysis aimed to determine how cultural content is represented across different grade levels.

Data and Sources of Data

To comprehensively address the research questions, this study employed a qualitative content analysis using textbooks as the sole source of data. The data were drawn from the English for Nusantara textbook series, which is officially designed for use in Indonesian junior high schools. The corpus consisted of three textbooks representing Grades VII, VIII, and IX. All units, texts, dialogues, illustrations, and learning activities contained in each textbook were systematically examined. The analysis focused on identifying, categorizing, and interpreting the relevant content in accordance with the research objectives.

Data Collection

As part of the data collection procedure, this study examined the cultural themes presented in the textbooks through a comprehensive review of all instructional materials, tasks, and exercises contained in the students' books. The analysis focused on the English for Nusantara textbooks for Grades VII, VIII, and IX, in which each unit is structured around a specific topic. This analytical process employed content analysis as the research method. Content analysis is a systematic research approach used to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns, themes, and meanings in textual, visual, or audiovisual data, and it is commonly applied to describe or quantify qualitative data [28].

Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study was conducted through four sequential stages. First, data were extracted from the English for Nusantara textbooks using a cultural themes checklist as the main analytical instrument. All identified data were subsequently classified according to predetermined cultural theme categories. In the second stage, the classified data were examined in detail, and information that did not align with the focus of the study was excluded to ensure analytical precision. The refined data were then systematically organized and presented to support further analysis. The third stage consisted of interpreting the organized data, formulating conclusions, and verifying the findings to ensure consistency and reliability. At this stage, the results were presented in relation to the research objectives and discussed with reference to relevant theoretical perspectives and findings from previous studies.

3. FINDINGS

This section presents the findings related to the first research question concerning the representation of cultural themes in the English for Nusantara (EFN) textbook series used in Indonesian junior high schools. The analysis focuses on the distribution of big "C" and small "c" cultural themes across Grades VII, VIII, and IX. The frequencies and percentages of each category are summarized in Tables 3.1 and 3.2.

Table 3.1 The Frequencies and Percentages of Big "C" Themes of EFN Series

Big "C" cultural themes	EFN VII		EFN VIII		EFN IX		Total	%
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%		
History	1	17%	2	29%	1	4%	4	5%
Art/Literature	1	17%	3	43%	3	13%	7	9%
Music	1	17%	0	0%	0	0%	1	1%
Politics	0	0%	2	29%	2	8%	4	5%
Geography	0	0%	0	0%	14	58%	14	18%
Economy	0	0%	0	0%	4	17%	4	5%
Traditions/Customs	3	50%	0	0%	0	0%	3	4%
Total	6	16%	7	19%	24	65%	37	49%

Table 3.2 The Frequencies and Percentages of small "c" Themes of EFN Series

Small "c" cultural themes	EFN VII		EFN VIII		EFN IX		Total	%
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%		
Daily Routines	5	29%	5	31%	3	50%	13	17%
Customs/Norms	3	18%	10	63%	0	0%	13	17%
Food	9	53%	0	0%	0	0%	9	12%
Values/Beliefs	0	0%	1	6%	3	50%	4	5%
Total	17	44%	16	41%	6	15%	39	51%

Overall, the findings indicate that cultural content in the EFN series is distributed almost evenly between small “c” culture (51%) and big “C” culture (49%). However, the emphasis varies considerably across grade levels, suggesting a developmental progression in cultural focus throughout the series.

English for Nusantara Grade VII

The findings for English for Nusantara (EFN) Grade VII reveal a clear dominance of small “c” cultural themes within the textbook content. As illustrated in Table 3.1 and 3.2, Food emerges as the most frequently represented category (9 occurrences), followed by Daily Routines (5), and both Customs/Norms and Traditions/Customs (3 occurrences each). These categories primarily reflect everyday cultural practices that are familiar, concrete, and easily accessible to students. Such themes emphasize lived experiences, habitual activities, and daily social interactions, which are particularly relevant for young learners who are still developing their linguistic and cognitive abilities.

The strong presence of food-related content indicates a pedagogical preference for culturally relatable and engaging topics. For example, in Chapter 2: Culinary and Me, students are introduced to comparisons between local Indonesian foods—such as *tempe bacem*, *pecel*, and *rujak*—and Western foods like pizza, burgers, and toast. This approach not only makes the learning material more meaningful and enjoyable, but also allows students to connect new language input with their own cultural background and prior knowledge. At the same time, these comparisons promote the development of intercultural awareness by encouraging learners to recognize similarities and differences between cultures in a simple and accessible way.

In contrast, big “C” cultural themes are minimally represented in the textbook. Categories such as History, Art/Literature, Music, and Traditions/Customs appear only occasionally and lack depth, while themes like Geography, Politics/Government, and Economy are entirely absent. This imbalance suggests that the Grade VII textbook deliberately prioritizes concrete, familiar, and experience-based cultural content over more abstract, institutional, or knowledge-heavy topics. Such a focus is likely aligned with the developmental stage of Grade VII students, as it supports their readiness to engage with language learning through contexts that are close to their daily lives. However, this also indicates a potential limitation, as students may have fewer opportunities to explore broader cultural knowledge and global perspectives that are typically associated with big “C”.

English for Nusantara Grade VIII

Similar to Grade VII, English for Nusantara (EFN) Grade VIII continues to prioritize small “c” culture, although there is a noticeable shift in thematic focus. As shown in Table 3.1 and 3.2, Customs/Norms becomes the most dominant category (9 occurrences), followed by Daily Routines (5). Unlike in Grade VII, Food is no longer represented, indicating a transition from concrete and tangible cultural topics toward a stronger emphasis on social behaviors, values, and communal practices. This shift suggests that learners at this level are gradually introduced to more socially oriented aspects of culture, which require a deeper understanding of interactions within a community.

Examples of Customs/Norms are prominently presented in Chapter 1: Celebrating Independence Day, where students are exposed to Indonesian cultural practices such as *panjat pinang*, traditional games, parades, and community festivals. These activities highlight not only routine cultural expressions but also the collective identity and shared values embedded in national celebrations. Through such content, learners are encouraged to appreciate cooperation, togetherness, and social responsibility, which are important cultural dimensions in Indonesian society. In addition, the focus on national events helps strengthen students’ sense of belonging while still supporting their English language development.

Big “C” cultural themes, on the other hand, appear in a more balanced yet still limited manner. Among these, Art/Literature is the most frequently represented category, followed by History, Music, and Politics/Government. For instance, the inclusion of the story *The Ugly Duckling* introduces students to well-known global literary works, while discussions of environmental-themed poetry provide opportunities to explore creative expression across cultures. Furthermore, brief references to governmental initiatives, such as anti-littering campaigns, offer a basic introduction to political awareness and civic responsibility. Despite this broader inclusion, several big “C” categories—such as Geography, Economy, and Traditions/Customs—remain absent. This pattern reinforces the idea that institutional and abstract cultural knowledge continues to play a secondary role at this level, as the textbook still prioritizes culturally relatable and socially grounded content that aligns with learners’ developmental stage.

English for Nusantara Grade IX

In contrast to the earlier grades, English for Nusantara (EFN) Grade IX demonstrates a clear and significant shift toward big “C” cultural themes. As illustrated in Table 3.1 and 3.2, Geography emerges as the most dominant category (14 occurrences), followed by Economy, Art/Literature, and Politics/Government. This pattern indicates a stronger curricular emphasis on macro-cultural, institutional, and conceptual topics that require higher levels of abstraction, analytical skills, and critical thinking. At this stage, learners are expected not only to understand language in familiar contexts but also to engage with more complex global issues and systems, reflecting their cognitive and academic development. Curriculum design should address the teaching and understanding of culture across the six developmental stages in ways that are distinct yet systematically connected, as these stages correspond to phases of language development [29].

At the same time, small “c” cultural themes are considerably reduced in frequency and prominence. Categories such as Daily Routines, Customs/Norms, Food, and Values/Beliefs appear only marginally, suggesting a decreased focus on learners’ immediate, everyday experiences. Although Traditions/Customs appears slightly more often compared to other small “c” categories, its representation remains limited and lacks the depth seen in earlier grades. This reduction indicates a pedagogical shift away from personal and experience-based cultural content toward broader, more generalized knowledge.

Furthermore, the Grade IX textbook tends to move away from explicitly Indonesian cultural contexts and instead emphasizes global and environmental themes. Chapters such as Exploring Fauna of Indonesia and Taking Trips primarily focus on geographical, ecological, and informational content rather than on social practices or cultural interactions. While these topics still include elements of local context, they are often presented through a scientific or descriptive lens rather than a cultural one. In addition, later units that explore themes such as fantasy, digital life, and upcycling further reduce the presence of culturally specific content, as they prioritize creativity, technology, and global issues over cultural identity.

As a result, both small “c” cultural themes and representations of Indonesian cultural identity become less prominent in Grade IX. While this shift supports the development of higher-order thinking skills and prepares students for more advanced academic discourse, it may also limit opportunities for learners to maintain a strong connection between language learning and their own cultural background. Consequently, the balance between global knowledge and local cultural representation becomes an important consideration in evaluating the overall effectiveness of the textbook.

4. DISCUSSION

Teaching English within a cultural context can involve several distinct challenges. One major difficulty is that cultures vary in their values and beliefs, which may sometimes conflict with those reflected in the English language. In addition, each culture has its own communication styles, which can create further obstacles in the teaching and learning process [30]. In some EFL contexts, learners often have limited opportunities to interact directly with the target culture in real-life situations. As a result, teaching and learning materials, particularly textbooks, become the primary means of providing such cultural exposure. These materials play a crucial role in compensating for the lack of authentic contact by introducing learners to cultural knowledge, practices, and perspectives associated with the English language [31].

Based on the findings of this study, it is evident that the English For Nusantara textbook series for junior high school presents a thoughtfully structured approach to cultural education, with a gradual and deliberate progression in the integration of cultural themes across Grades VII, VIII, and IX. This progression reflects both the cognitive development of students and the pedagogical aims of fostering intercultural awareness and communicative competence through English language instruction [32]. Moreover, gaining cultural awareness is crucial for effective language learning [33].

The discussion of cultural themes in the textbooks reveals a noticeable shift from predominantly small “c” in Grade VII to a more pronounced inclusion of big “C” in Grade IX. In Grade VII, the emphasis lies heavily on accessible and familiar cultural elements such as food, daily routines, and customs/norms. These categories of small “c” mirror students’ everyday experiences, enabling them to engage with the language through contexts they can personally relate to. As scholars note, small “c” (daily routines, social norms, etc.) provides the familiar context for early learners [34]. Abu Hussein (2022)[35] also emphasized that learners should engage more with small ‘c’ cultural themes rather than big ‘C’ themes.

As the curriculum advances into Grade VIII, a transition begins to emerge. While small “c” still dominates, particularly in the form of customs/norms and daily routines, there is a slight increase in the

presence of big “C”, with categories like art/literature and history being introduced. For instance, students are exposed to national celebrations like Indonesia’s Independence Day and global issues such as anti-littering campaigns, fostering both local and global cultural awareness. The inclusion of literature, such as Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Ugly Duckling,” further expands the cultural dimension of learning by incorporating classic literary narratives that transcend national boundaries. The development of the materials regarding to small “c” and big “C” suggests a curricular intention to deepen students’ cultural understanding by gradually introducing more abstract and institutional concepts. This reflects a progressive shift toward more complex and abstract cultural themes as learners advance in their language studies [35].

The most significant shift occurs in Grade IX, where big “C” cultural themes particularly geography, economy, and art/literature take precedence over small “c” themes. This reflects a pedagogical pivot toward more analytical and global cultural content. The strong focus on geography, as seen in chapters discussing Indonesian fauna and travel destinations, points to a curriculum designed to broaden students’ understanding of the world and their place in it. This perspective generally fosters a favorable perception of the country [36]. Although the inclusion of small “c” elements like daily routines, food, and values is noticeably reduced, this appears to be a deliberate strategy to challenge students with more complex topics that require higher-order thinking skills and greater linguistic proficiency. The shift away from local, personal culture to environmental and global themes in Grade IX aligns with the educational objective of preparing students for more academic and critical engagement with culture. By using textbooks aligned with national standards, teachers organize their instructional materials and use them to support students’ learning both inside and outside the classroom [37]. This pattern mirrors general findings in EFL materials: more abstract big “C” content (history, art, geography, institutions) is introduced gradually at higher levels, whereas small “c” elements (everyday living, routines, social norms) are prominent at all stages [34].

Moreover, result of the analysis showing that small “c” is slightly presented more than big “C” supports the previous studies [27], [35], [38]. Cultural themes categories such as daily routines, customs, and lifestyle tend to be more relatable and accessible for learners, as they reflect everyday cultural practices rather than grand historical, political, or literary achievements. By prioritizing small “c”, materials provide students with practical, real-life contexts that not only enhance communicative competence but also foster intercultural awareness in a way that is immediately applicable to their personal experiences. This reinforces the idea that effective cultural learning in EFL contexts benefits from focusing on relatable, lived experiences over more distant, abstract cultural concepts.

However, the presence of big “C” is also required to balance the development of learning materials that students are exposed to both the tangible aspects of everyday life and the broader cultural institutions that shape global societies [14]. By gradually introducing complex cultural topics, the textbooks align with the cognitive readiness of students at different stages of their development. The gradual transition from small “c” to big “C” reflects a well-considered pedagogical approach that begins with relatable content and moves toward more abstract cultural constructs [35]. This method fosters a holistic understanding of culture and equips students with the linguistic and cultural tools necessary for effective global communication. Furthermore, students can also explore learning resources beyond the ELT textbook used in class to expand their understanding of real-life contexts and develop cultural awareness that extends not only to local perspectives but also to a global scale [39]. Future textbook development might further enhance this approach by ensuring a more consistent representation of underrepresented cultural themes such as economy, politics/government, and traditions, especially in the higher grades, to provide a richer and more diverse cultural experience. Meanwhile, the most reliable way to understand how different types of cultural content influence English language learning would be through well-designed experimental studies comparing different groups of learners. However, such research has not yet been carried out. As a result, there is still no clear evidence to determine the most effective or ideal way to present cultural materials in English language teaching textbooks [40].

5. CONCLUSION

First, the findings of this study indicate that the English for Nusantara textbook series exhibits a clear and intentional progression in the presentation of cultural themes across grade levels, which appears to align with learners’ developmental stages and interests. At the introductory level (Grade VII), the textbooks predominantly emphasize small “c” cultural elements, such as daily routines, food, and social customs, thereby situating language learning within contexts that are familiar, concrete, and directly connected to students’ everyday lives. This approach supports early engagement by allowing learners to draw upon their own experiences as a foundation for understanding both language and culture. As

students progress to higher grades (Grades VIII and IX), the textbooks gradually incorporate a greater proportion of big “C” cultural themes, including history, art and literature, geography, and economic aspects. This shift reflects a pedagogical intention to expand learners’ cultural horizons by introducing more abstract, institutional, and global perspectives. The gradual transition from small “c” to big “C” culture suggests that the series is designed with an awareness of students’ cognitive and linguistic development, moving from tangible cultural experiences toward more complex cultural concepts. Overall, this progression indicates a structured curricular design that seeks to balance learners’ interests with the increasing demands of cultural understanding in foreign language learning.

6. REFERENCES

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