



REPRESENTATION OF LOCAL WISDOM AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN PRIMARY SCHOOL ENGLISH TEXTBOOKS: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC EVALUATION OF THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM

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Abstract

The present study examines how English primary school textbooks in Indonesia represent cultural identity and local wisdom within the pedagogical paradigm of the Indonesian Kurikulum Merdeka, employing Cortazzi and Jin's (1999) cultural categories. The study focuses on critically analyzing the textual and visual representations of Source, Target, and International Cultures as found in the Grow with English series used by Grade 1 and Grade 5 learners at Raudhatul Jannah Elementary School. The research methodology, based on sociolinguistic theory, utilizes a qualitative Critical Content Analysis which triangulates textual and visual document analysis with semi-structured interviews with a homeroom teacher as well as practical pedagogical resonance. The findings illustrate unmistakable Source Culture orientations evidenced from local geographic nomenclatures, national school uniformations, and less controversial symbols with regional and religious associations (the hijab, the udeng), pervasive among the Target Cultures or International Cultures. However, the textbooks cater to Indonesian national policy (Permendikbudristek No 12 of 2024) and local ordinances (Cilegon Mayor's Regulation) and lead English teaching in strictly localized sociolinguistics contexts immediately relatable to students. The study ends with this, which says that their model of localized content will bring down the set of effects filters, called sociolinguistic dissonance and builds a local id, indigenously infused ready for global bilingual identity.

Keywords: Sociolinguistics, Kurikulum Merdeka, Local Wisdom, English Textbooks, Cultural Identity

Introduction

Sociolinguists view language as far more than a mere instrument for conveying messages between individuals. Rather than simply mirroring or describing our existence, language actively shapes who we are, constructing our identities,



personal values, social behaviors, and the communities we inhabit (Kramersch, 1998). If a human is learning a new language, they are not only accessing words but travelling across two distinct worlds of meaning. When language classes remove context to cultural principles, research is starting to show us that learners disconnect from their own lives (Hidayati & Mulyono 2023). The language no longer feels functional and the ability to speak that language becomes alienating. This is a big deal in primary school English classrooms. Very young children have not yet developed a full sense of self or an understanding of how they fit into the world around them. If teachers present English solely within the parameters of British or American culture, people may leave school believing their own cultural history and identity have no place in English classrooms. Sociolinguists refer to this phenomenon of cultural alienation and it is an issue that needs solving.

The concept of contextualization of culture in the language textbooks was introduced and explained by Cortazzi and Jin (1999). They had identified three types of cultural content: students' culture (Source Culture), the culture of English-speaking countries such as the US or UK (Target Culture) and cultures from outside these regions (International Culture). For decades, English teaching relied on invasion by Target Culture: that exposure to Western culture was automatic when learning English. Yet language experts today dispute this. They claim that we should start from the cultural backgrounds of the students themselves. The result is: students start using English to speak-about themselves their stories, their communities. They are not merely accepting Western ideas; they have an interface role, rendering their world into English. However, if you open the Indonesian English textbooks today, you will find that this problem still persists. The pages are filled with one Western image after another, one generic city story after another, while the very regional cultures that students live in the local traditions, foods, stories and identities that matter to them hardly come onto the page at all (Kusuma et al., 2024; Wijaya & Rahman, 2025).

This lack of local representation in the ELT materials is in direct contradiction to current national educational policies. Legally and philosophically, the Indonesian government has implemented the Kurikulum Merdeka through the Regulation of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Permendikbudristek) No. 12 of 2024. One of the important mandates of this regulation is the application of Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) which firmly requires that the material is based on the student's immediate environment and local wisdom (kearifan lokal). The national directive clearly states that the learning materials must not be monolithic or they must speak to the geographical, social and cultural realities of the students in order to promote meaningful learning experiences.

Moreover, this national legal framework is strongly reinforced at the regional level. More specifically, in the city of Cilegon, the protection of local identity is strongly guarded by local regulations namely the Cilegon Mayor's Regulation (Peraturan Wali Kota/Perwali Cilegon) concerning the integration of Local Content (Muatan Lokal) in basic education. The existence of Permendikbudristek No. 12 of 2024 and



the local Perwali Cilegon has created a unique legal and pedagogical mandate for all teaching materials, including English books and other student worksheets, to actively engage with the local culture and daily realities of Cilegon. Commercial publishers not only commit a sociolinguistic pedagogical error by providing schools in Cilegon with generic English textbooks that show snowmen, Western cuisines, or foreign landmarks instead of local heritage, but they also do not meet the dual mandate of national and local educational policies (Pratama & Setyorini, 2024).

These strong legal frameworks notwithstanding, there is a big empirical gap on how these policies are implemented in the actual textbooks that are used in classrooms. Therefore, this mini research is aimed to critically evaluate the representation of Source Culture versus Target Culture in the English textbook used by the students of grade 1 and 5 at Raudhatul Jannah Elementary School. The present study, adopting a sociolinguistic perspective, examines the textbook's visual and textual content to determine whether the materials are aligned with the contextual requirements of the Kurikulum Merdeka and local regulations or still hold the global cultural hegemony. The results of this study are expected to have direct implications for primary school teachers and local policymakers in selecting and developing ELT materials which are truly representative of the cultural identity of the students.

To address the aforementioned sociolinguistic and pedagogical concerns, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How are the cultural categories Source Culture, Target Culture, and International Culture represented textually and visually in the *Grow with English* textbooks for Grade 1 and Grade 5?
2. What are the teachers' perceptions of the pedagogical and sociolinguistic impacts of these cultural representations, particularly in the context of local educational policies in Cilegon?

Theoretical Framework

Sociolinguistics: Language, Culture and Identity

In the frame of sociolinguistics, language and culture are not separable. As Kramsch (1998) puts it, “Language is not just a system of arbitrary symbols, but a deep expression of cultural reality”. The vocabulary, idioms and narratives that are offered in a language are imbued with the cultural attitudes and historical contexts of its speakers. When used in the context of foreign language education, this principle highlights a major psychological and sociological phenomenon: the learning of English is simultaneously an immersion into new cultural ideologies.



Recent sociolinguistic studies emphasize the importance of cultural anchoring for young learners. Children are in the early stages of constructing their own identity, so the use of a foreign language not associated with their native cultural identity can lead to feelings of alienation. According to Setiawan and Yulia (2025), the exclusive use of foreign cultural norms in teaching English language creates a “sociolinguistic dissonance” and makes students feel the target language has no relevance to their everyday lives. Hence, a successful ELT approach should be based on the learners’ native identity to internalize the foreign language as a means to express their cultural realities, not to take on a foreign persona (Nugroho et al., 2024).

The Framework for Cultural Categories in ELT Materials

To understand what's actually in these English textbooks, Cortazzi and Jin's (1999) framework provides a straightforward tool for analysis. They identified three kinds of cultural content in language materials. First, there's what students bring with them their own culture. In this case, that means Indonesian culture and specifically the local traditions of Banten. This includes local foods, landmarks students would recognize, traditional games they might play, and the names that are familiar from their own communities. Then there's Target Culture the culture of places where people speak English natively: America, Britain, Australia. This shows up when textbooks include things like Halloween, winter snow, or how people eat in the West. The third is International Culture, which encompasses cultures from non-English-speaking countries and reflects the function of English as a global lingua franca, as exemplified by references to Japanese sushi or the Egyptian pyramids.

The Target Culture has dominated ELT textbook historically, assuming that learning English means assimilation into Western culture. But this idea is strongly rejected by current pedagogical paradigms. Sari and Hidayat (2024) in their recent critical content analysis found that the heavy reliance on Target Culture in primary school textbooks perpetuates linguistic imperialism and marginalizes local heritage. Putra et al. (2025) also underscore that the Source Culture needs to be prioritized in the Global Englishes era. Learners acquire the vocabulary and cultural confidence to act as mediators who can proudly communicate their local identity to the international community.

Contextual Teaching and Local Wisdom in the Merdeka Curriculum

The existence of Source Culture in the sociolinguistic framework is in line with the pedagogical philosophy of Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL). CTL maintains that meaning is generated only when learners connect the academic content to their daily life context. This means that in the context of language learning, students will be more successful in developing communicative



competence if the topics discussed are related to their immediate physical and social environment (Wahyuni, 2026).

This contextual approach is the ideological backbone of Indonesia's Kurikulum Merdeka (Emancipated Curriculum). Recent national policies have led to a curriculum that moves away from rigid, centrally designed materials towards flexible, locally adaptable content. Schools are encouraged to incorporate Muatan Lokal (Local Content) into mainstream subjects to develop students' character and pride in their culture. Based on a policy evaluation by Pratama and Setyorini in 2024, the availability of teaching materials that reflect the characteristics of the region greatly determines the success of the Kurikulum Merdeka. When English textbooks do not include these local contexts, choosing generic or Westernized narratives, they fundamentally violate the contextual principles of the curriculum and hinder the socio-cognitive development of the students (Rahmawati, 2025).

Method

The study employs a qualitative methodology using a Critical Content Analysis design, which systematically quantifies manifest content and interprets its latent sociolinguistic and ideological meanings (Krippendorff, 2018). Methodological triangulation was used to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, combining the textual analysis with the practical knowledge of an educational practitioner (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The main data source in this study was the supplementary English textbook series entitled *Grow with English* published by Erlangga. This material was intentionally chosen because it is actively used by Grade 1 and Grade 5 students in SD Raudhatul Jannah in Cilegon, Banten. The units of analysis in these documents are reading texts, conversational texts, exercise sentences and pictures. To contextualize these textual findings, secondary data was collected via a semi-structured interview with the homeroom teacher. The interview discussed the freedom of the school in selecting the materials, the cultural suitability of the book with the students' daily lives, students' cognitive responses in foreign contexts, and teaching strategies implemented to incorporate Muatan Lokal based on the Kurikulum Merdeka and the specific directions of the Cilegon Mayor's Regulation (Perwali Cilegon).

Data collection was carried out in two parallel stages: the documentary observation to collect and code relevant textual and visual elements of the selected grades, and the targeted teacher interview. The data collected were then processed using the interactive data analysis model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). In the data condensation stage, raw textbook data was sifted through a deductive coding matrix based on Cortazzi and Jin's (1999) cultural categories that classified items as either Source Culture (SC), Target Culture (TC), or International Culture (IC), while interview notes were simultaneously condensed to identify recurring themes on cultural alienation and local identity. Then the data was presented with qualitative frequency descriptors for the textbook content and a thematic narrative for the interview responses. The last step of conclusion drawing and verification



was done by synthesizing the identified cultural patterns with the teacher's experiences and critically evaluating with sociolinguistic identity theories and legal demands of Permendikbudristek No. 12 of 2024 to determine the contextual validity of the textbook in the Cilegon educational landscape definitively.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

The data of this sociolinguistic research is taken from the methodological triangulation which consists of critical document analysis of the selected units taken purposively from the Grow with English textbook series (Grade 1 and Grade 5, Erlangga) and semi-structured interview with the homeroom teacher in Cilegon, Banten. The findings are systematically organized into the textual and visual representations of cultural categories, and then the pedagogical perspectives of the practitioner.

1. Textual and visual representations of source culture

Analysis of the documents revealed a massive presence of Source Culture (SC) in both Grade 1 and Grade 5 textbooks in line with the framework conceptualized by Cortazzi and Jin (1999). The publisher has strategically integrated the multicultural identity of Indonesia into the central storyline of the English learning materials. The characters' naming is heavily influenced by the diversity of Indonesian demographics, in terms of text. The characters are named with names that are closely related to national and regional identities such as Anisa Azizah, Gunawan, Rio, Zahra, Rasti, Made and Nurul. Moreover, the geographic contextualization is very local, as shown by the presence of specific local addresses (e.g. Pramuka Street 21) and major national cities (e.g. Jakarta).

The textbooks visually provide considerable semiotic evidence of Indonesian cultural preservation. The visual representation intentionally emphasizes the country's motto of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity). The illustrations always show students in the compulsory red-and-white national elementary school uniforms, thus giving instant familiarity for the students. The religious and regional diversity is visually celebrated through female characters in Islamic Hijab (e.g. Anisa and Nurul) and male characters in traditional Balinese headgear, *Udeng* (e.g. Made). In addition, national landmarks such as the National Monument (Monas) are highly visible on visual properties such as character T-shirts. There is a consistent visual and textual presentation from Grade 1 through Grade 5 that suggests a systematic design for grounding the foreign language in the students' native cultural paradigm.

2. The Marginalization of Target and Global Cultures



This textbook series marginalises the representation of the Target Culture (TC) unlike the ELT materials which have a strong bias towards Western ideologies. TC elements are extremely rare and are mostly limited to isolated character names (e.g. Ms. Bertha, Jessica, Jojo) and universally adapted Western leisure activities (e.g. the game “Simon Says”). The physical environments in the illustrations are completely free of Western geographical markers, such as snowy winters or Western architectural styles. Similarly, in the analyzed units, International Culture (IC) that encompasses cultural elements of the non-English speaking world communities, is practically non-existent. The data strongly suggests an intentional editorial decision to limit foreign cultural exposure in favor of local contextualization.

3. Pedagogical Validation: The Practitioner’s View

An observation by a homeroom teacher on this was an actual even textbook problem opened her eyes. It turns out that the regionalism was not arbitrary at all, but had some kind of a mandate. One of those was about local wisdom instruction (Muatan Lokal) at basic education conducted by the Mayor of Cilegon. This a quite simple thing we could all do; create prospects for students to be excited about being in their region. What happens in the classroom at Cilegon reflects a demographic dynamic that cannot be entirely avoided by design in textbooks. A blend both of children from migrant families scattered across Indonesia and local youth from Banten, many of whom have abandoned their regional languages by now even in the home. This is a splintered linguistic context where the momentum of traditional intergenerational language transmission has stalled under socio-demographic pressures as people moved from rural to urban contexts. Textbooks like *Grow with English* work in different ways than they might in linguistically homogeneous settings in such a context. While the localized nature of the cultural content you will find usefully but not necessarily forgive pedagogical convenience, it also meets a real sociolinguistic need in the classroom. While grade 1 students might not know these cultural cues, they do recognize a hijab; they see names with which they are familiar; they see school environments (the classroom) that parallel their own. Their anxiety drops. The outsider language no longer sounds like something that can only be used to write about things they have never observed or walked through. They do not just sit there and pretend to be British or American kids, they learn English so that they have something to say about themselves.

Discussion

1. Deconstructing English Language Teaching Materials for Cultural Hegemony

The study findings provide empirical evidence for a notable shift in paradigm of Indonesian ELT materials away from the cultural hegemony of West. Traditionally (as also highlighted by researchers in the field of linguistic imperialism), English language education functions as a platform for Western ideologies, where learners from the South have to adapt to Target Culture narratives in order to be deemed competent communicators. The *Grow with English* textbook series obliterates this



trajectory. The materials strongly support the claim that learning a global language does not have to involve the loss of local identity, giving most priority to the Source Culture. The textbook does not portray Indonesian students as passive consumers of foreign cultures, but as active cultural mediators equipped with English vocabulary for the expression of their own multicultural realities.

2. Sociolinguistic Identity and Context Learning

The content of the textbook is very much in line with the Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) principles imposed by the Kurikulum Merdeka. From a sociolinguistic perspective, language acquisition is intrinsically linked to the construction of identity (Kramsch, 1998). The curriculum's approach of introducing English using familiar Indonesian contexts from Grade 1 and maintaining it through Grade 5 also helps to prevent the "sociolinguistic dissonance" a psychological state in which young learners feel disconnected from their native roots due to an overexposure to foreign materials. The local tradition and global communication encounter are natural because the Udeng or the Hijab are visually present in English conversations. It conveys a strong cognitive message to the students that English is a flexible medium that can accommodate and respect Indonesian values.

3. The Local Linguistic Environment and Educational Policy

This study uncovers a critical nexus between textbook decisions and local language strategies. The key headline story is the town of Cilegon itself a colourful, industrial city with memories but few traditions left. You have people coming in from different places, you have factories developing, and it is all a modernization. In this frenzy, the cultural heritage of the region is ignored and lost. For some reason, this has all made the English classroom an almost sacred space of local culture preservation. The local government selected textbooks inscribed with Bantenese landmarks, names and traditions: not only issued a policy but partially created classroom space on which this culture mattered. This is something of a strange quirk for the textbook, given that both these migrant kids attending the local school and local Bantenese children are being taught from these parlances. A kid who arrived in their family last year; and the grandchild of people who lived here generations before: both know the same sites, the same names. This common ground grounds its members to where they don't feel lost in the world. Ultimately, it is simple but easy: English becomes something meaningful in their life. It's not imposed from outside. It is theirs; it is a part of their community and learning it to matter.

Conclusion

This research investigated the representation of culture in English textbooks and how they manifest for Grade 1, Grade 5 Grow with English students in Cilegon. But one thing was clear, something significant has changed. Since the Kurikulum Merdeka, this has changed how these textbooks are produced. They are not being inundated by American and British culture anymore. Instead, they are based in real



Indonesian life real places like Djombang and Balikpapan, real names like Emha Ainun Nadjib, familiar images students can actually identify with. As mundane as it may sound, this is pretty important. Instead of the familiar English language that the children will speak, they feel like foreign culture textbooks, and then this is how they learn English when they will say not to me but to my friends but these materials do something else. They tell a simple story, by constantly showing Indonesian faces, Indonesian things and Indonesia way of being: English is for you too. It's not someone else's language.

This contributes outside of school too, and directly addresses a real need in Cilegon. The city with people coming from everywhere, traditions being blanketed by urban sprawl. This was understood by the local government, and they made a decision: tie English to local identity. And it works. Students don't feel as anxious, nor do they feel like they have to let who they are escape them in order to learn a lingua franca. Instead, they learned to exist in two worlds, articulating themselves fluently in English while remaining primarily grounded in their own culture and roots. The deeper lesson is this teaching English is more than just about the grammar and vocabulary. So, it's about acknowledging who your students are, and allowing for that in the classroom. That turns learning into a booster for students rather than a displacer, when that happens.

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