



التمثيل الثقافي الغربي في كتب اللغة الإنجليزية المستخدمة في المدارس الدولية الليبية

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Received: 24 May 2026

Accepted: 26 May 2026

Published: 4 June 2026

الملخص:

تتناول هذه الدراسة تمثيلات الثقافة في كتب تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية المستخدمة في أربع مدارس دولية في ليبيا. واستناداً إلى النظريات الإمبريالية الثقافية، ونظرية التمثيل، والمناهج الخفية، والنظرية السيميائية الاجتماعية، تستكشف الدراسة كيفية تضمين المعاني الثقافية داخل المواد التعليمية. وقد تم استخدام تحليل محتوى نوعي لسبعة كتب دراسية، مدعوماً بالتحليل الكمي للتكرارات، حيث تم تحديد ست فئات رئيسية هي: الدين والطقوس، الطعام والشراب، السلوك الاجتماعي، اللغة والمحتوى، العلاقات بين الجنسين، وأنماط اللباس. وقد نتج عن تحليل الكتب السبعة تحديد وترميز 137 حالة من التمثيلات الثقافية. وتُظهر النتائج هيمنة واضحة للمحتوى الثقافي الغربي، والذي غالباً ما يتعارض مع القيم الاجتماعية والثقافية والدينية الليبية. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن كتب تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية تنقل رسائل أيديولوجية ضمنية تؤثر في تشكيل تصورات المتعلمين الثقافية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الهوية الثقافية؛ التمثيل الثقافي؛ كتب اللغة الإنجليزية؛ المنهج الخفي.

Western Cultural Representation in English Language Textbooks Used in Libyan International Schools

ABSTRACT:

This study examines the cultural representations in English language teaching (ELT) textbooks used in four Libyan international schools. Grounded primarily in Cultural Imperialism Theory and supported by Representation Theory, Hidden Curriculum Theory, and socio-semiotic perspectives, the study explores how cultural meanings are embedded in educational materials. Accordingly, A qualitative content analysis supported by descriptive quantitative frequency counts was conducted on seven ELT textbooks, identified six main categories: Religion, Food and Drink, Social Behavior, Language and Content, Gender Relations, and Dress Styles. Seven textbooks were analyzed, yielding 137 coded instances of cultural representation. Findings reveal a dominance of Western cultural content, often misaligned with Libyan sociocultural and Islamic values. The study found that ELT textbooks can carry implicit ideological messages that shape learners' cultural perceptions. It stresses the need for culturally balanced materials, particularly in settings where local cultural and religious values are important considerations in education.

Keywords: ELT textbooks; cultural representation; cultural imperialism; hidden curriculum.

Introduction:

English language teaching (ELT) materials play a significant role in developing learners' linguistic competence and cultural awareness. Among these materials, textbooks remain the most influential pedagogical resources, particularly in EFL contexts where opportunities for authentic language exposure are limited. Beyond their instructional function, textbooks also serve as carriers of cultural meanings, values, and ideologies that shape learners'



perceptions and intercultural understanding (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2023; Richards, 2022).

The international expansion of English has intensified the dominance of Western-produced ELT materials, especially those published in English-speaking countries such as the UK and the USA. Although these materials aim to foster communicative competence and intercultural awareness, research on Global English has raised concerns regarding the continued dominance of Inner-Circle cultural perspectives within ELT material (Rose, McKinley, & Galloway, 2020).

In the context of Libya, where cultural identity is deeply rooted in Islamic values and social traditions, the introduction of Western-oriented ELT materials presents both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, international textbooks can provide learners with access to global knowledge and intercultural communication skills. On the other hand, these textbooks may introduce cultural elements that conflict with local norms, particularly in areas such as religion, social behavior, gender relations, and lifestyle practices. Following the political and educational changes after 2011, Libya witnessed a significant expansion of international schools adopting foreign curricula and textbooks (Reuters, 2013). As a result, the cultural content of these textbooks may not adequately reflect the values, beliefs, and expectations of Libyan society.

Research Questions

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. What types of cultural representations are present in English language textbooks used in international schools in Tripoli, Libya?
2. Which cultural themes appear most frequently in the selected ELT textbooks?

3. How are Western cultural values and lifestyles represented through textual and visual content in these textbooks?
4. To what extent do the cultural representations in the textbooks align or conflict with Libyan cultural and Islamic values?

Research Objectives

To answer these questions, this study has the following objectives:

1. Identify the major cultural themes represented in English language textbooks used in international schools in Tripoli, Libya.
2. Analyze the frequency and distribution of cultural representations across different thematic categories.
3. Examine how Western cultural values, beliefs, and lifestyles are portrayed through textual and visual content.
4. Evaluate the extent to which the cultural content of the selected textbooks aligns with or conflicts with Libyan cultural and Islamic values.

Previous Studies

Recent research has increasingly raised concerns regarding the cultural implications of English language teaching (ELT) textbooks and their influence on learners' cultural perceptions and identities. In many contexts, English learning materials have been criticized for promoting Western lifestyles, values, and social norms while marginalizing local cultural perspectives.

For instance, studies conducted in China and Pakistan demonstrated that English language learning materials may contribute to cultural and identity-related concerns among learners exposed to dominant Western perspectives (Shah & Pathan, 2016; Guo & Gao, 2023). Similarly, Pan and Seargeant (2012) argued that the global spread of English in China was associated with fears that Western values and ideologies could gradually overshadow local traditions and cultural practices. Recent findings by Zhang, Li, Chen, and Yan (2024) further emphasize that cultural representation in educational materials significantly shapes learners' worldviews and cultural perceptions.



Within Middle Eastern EFL contexts, several recent studies have highlighted the conflict between imported educational materials and local cultural and religious values. Mostafaei Alaei and Parsazadeh (2021) argued that international ELT textbooks often privilege target-culture perspectives while marginalizing local cultures. Likewise, Seidi et al. (2022), in a study conducted in Iran, found that imported ELT textbooks promoting global cultural values influenced learners' social identity and cultural orientations, highlighting the role of educational materials in shaping learners' perceptions of culture.

On one hand, Krsmanovic (2020) argued that the exposure to foreign cultural content does not always result in the abandonment of local identity; instead, many learners adopt an integrative approach that allows them to engage with global cultures while maintaining their original cultural values. On the other hand, other studies have suggested that prolonged exposure to Western-oriented educational materials may gradually influence learners' beliefs, attitudes, and social behaviors (Mezara & Bounab, 2021)

Despite the growing body of international research on cultural representation in ELT materials, limited attention has been paid to the Libyan educational context, particularly international schools that rely heavily on imported textbooks. In addition, few studies have examined both textual and visual cultural representations through a combined qualitative and quantitative content analysis framework grounded in Libyan sociocultural and Islamic values. This gap highlights the need for context-specific research exploring how imported ELT materials represent cultural values within Libyan international education.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in a set of complementary theoretical frameworks that collectively explain how language, culture, and ideology are embedded and transmitted through educational materials. One of the central theoretical perspectives underpinning this study is Cultural Imperialism. This viewpoint argues that the global expansion of English is not culturally neutral, but is often intertwined with the spread of Western cultural values, ideologies, and power structures through language education and policy (Phillipson, 2018). Within this framework, ELT materials serve as vehicles through which



dominant cultures project their norms, beliefs, and lifestyles onto learners in non-Western contexts. The widespread use of textbooks produced in Inner Circle countries, such as the United Kingdom and the United States, reinforces this dynamic by privileging Western perspectives while marginalizing local cultural identities (Widodo, Perfecto, Van Canh, & Buripakdi, 2018; Gray, 2022). In this sense, language teaching becomes a form of soft power, shaping not only how learners communicate but also how they perceive the world.

Closely related to the Cultural Imperialism theory is Representation Theory, which argues that meaning is not simply reflected through language, but actively constructed by it. From this perspective, textbooks do not merely present neutral cultural information; rather, they shape particular versions of reality through the selection, organization, and framing of ideas and cultural content (Hall, 2021). Through both textual and visual elements, these textbooks create representations of social life that can normalize certain cultural practices. This process of representation is particularly important in understanding how Western lifestyles and values may be presented as universal, thereby influencing learners' perceptions of what is considered "normal" or "desirable."

Another key concept informing this study is the hidden curriculum, which refers to the implicit messages, values, and social norms conveyed through educational materials and classroom practices. These hidden elements may include assumptions related to social relationships, gender roles, lifestyle choices, and moral values that indirectly shape learners' attitudes and perceptions (Apple, 2019). According to Sellers and Alarcón (2023), these implicit messages are often more influential than explicit content because they are absorbed unconsciously by learners.

In addition to these frameworks, this study incorporates insights from socio-semiotic and multimodal theory (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021), which emphasizes that meaning is constructed through multiple modes, including images, layout, and design, in addition to written text. Textbooks are inherently multimodal, combining visual and textual elements to convey information. Images, in particular, play a powerful role in shaping cultural representation, as they can reinforce stereotypes or normalize specific lifestyles without explicit explanation. This study adopts a more comprehensive



approach to understanding how cultural meanings are communicated by analyzing both textual and visual content.

These theoretical frameworks informed both the coding process and interpretation of findings. Cultural Imperialism Theory guided the analysis of Western cultural dominance, Representation Theory informed the interpretation of textual and visual portrayals, Hidden Curriculum Theory supported the examination of implicit ideological messages, and socio-semiotic theory assisted in analyzing how meaning was communicated through images and multimodal elements.

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative content analysis supported by descriptive quantitative frequency counts. The qualitative component is used to interpret textual and visual data in order to identify patterns, themes, and underlying meanings embedded within the selected English language textbooks (Bowen, 2009).

This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of cultural messages, ideologies, and value systems represented in the materials. In addition, quantitative content analysis is employed through frequency counts and percentage distributions to measure the occurrence of identified cultural categories. These numerical results are used to complement and support the qualitative interpretation by providing a clear overview of the distribution and dominance of cultural themes. The integration of both approaches enhances the reliability and comprehensiveness of the analysis.

Data Selection

The data for this study consist of seven English language textbooks currently used in four international schools in Tripoli, Libya. These textbooks are published by internationally recognized publishers, primarily Cambridge and Pearson, and are designed for global use rather than for specific cultural contexts.

The selected textbooks are intended for secondary-level learners, typically aged between 14 and 17 years old. The analysis is limited to the content of these textbooks, including reading texts, dialogues, exercises, and visual materials, in order to examine how cultural representations are constructed within them.

The textbooks were selected through purposive sampling based on three criteria: their current use in international schools in Tripoli, their relevance to secondary-level English language instruction, and their widespread adoption of internationally published curricula. The selected schools were chosen because they represent prominent international educational institutions operating within the Libyan context.

Analytical Framework and Coding Scheme

To ensure a systematic and replicable analysis, a coding checklist was developed based on established models of cultural analysis in language education, particularly those proposed by Lee (2009), Stemler (2001), and Byram (1997). The checklist was adapted to reflect the Libyan cultural context, with particular attention to Islamic values and societal norms.

The analysis was structured around six main cultural categories:

1. Religion and Rituals
2. Food and Drink
3. Social Behavior
4. Language and Content
5. Gender Relations
6. Dress Styles

Each category included both explicit references, such as direct mentions of cultural practices, and implicit representations conveyed through images, narratives, or scenarios. The coding process involved identifying textual and visual examples of cultural content within the textbooks, including dialogues, reading passages, exercises, and images. Each example was treated as a single unit of analysis, classified according to the relevant category, and later quantified to determine its frequency and relative prominence.

To enhance consistency in the coding process, the analysis was guided by a cultural checklist based on mainstream Libyan sociocultural norms and Islamic values. Given the

central role of Islam in Libyan society, Islamic principles were used as a contextual framework for identifying representations that may be considered culturally sensitive or potentially conflicting within the local context, rather than relying solely on the researchers' personal interpretations. Accordingly, representations depicting practices, values, or behaviors that are restricted, discouraged, or socially uncommon in Libyan society were classified as potentially conflicting. This approach provided a transparent and culturally relevant basis for the analysis.

Ethical Considerations

This study is based on publicly available educational materials and does not involve human participants. Therefore, no ethical risks are associated with data collection. However, care was taken to ensure that the analysis remains objective, respectful, and academically grounded.

Findings

The content analysis was conducted on seven selected English language textbooks used in four international schools in Tripoli, Libya. Across these seven textbooks, 137 instances of cultural representation were identified and coded based on the predefined analytical categories. The results show a clear distribution of cultural themes across the six categories. A noticeable dominance was observed in certain areas, particularly religion and rituals, food and drink, and social behavior, which accounted for the highest number of occurrences within the dataset.

Table 1. Frequency and percentage distribution of the identified cultural themes.

Theme	Frequency	Percentage
Religion and Rituals	42	30.7%
Food and Drink	33	24.1%
Social Behavior	28	20.4%
Language and Content	20	14.6%

Gender Relations	9	6.6%
Dress Styles	5	3.6%
Total	137	100%

Religion and Rituals

In the books, 30.7% of the identified themes included religious representations that may conflict with Islamic beliefs and practices. These themes contained various examples of rituals and practices from different religions. Some of these examples were mentioned casually to make certain practices seem normal, and they might go against Islamic norms.

‘If there’s a God isn’t that a design fault? If you’ve built something, you want efficiency. If I were God, I would have designed sleep so we could stay awake.’
Pearson Edexcel International GCSE. (2017 p.123).

Accompanied by the following image, students are prompted to “list two ways the artist showed Jesus as an ordinary suffering human and not god” Living History 1 (2004, p.158)



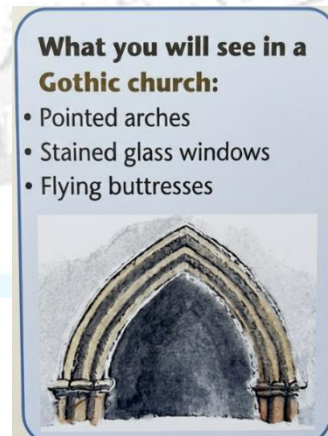
An image accompanied by this text “the birth of Jesus [...] this story is about God coming to earth” (p.162).



The following image describes, “Mary, Joseph and the baby, [...] the message of this picture is that Jesus was a human being like us” (p.163).



The book extensively discussed various churches featuring numerous mentions and images, and provided detailed explanations on how to differentiate between them (p.140).



The following images illustrate "the main events moments in the life of St. Patrick," prompting students to narrate his story using their own words (p.139).



Social Behavior

Social behavior accounts for 20.4% of the analyzed content and includes representations of lifestyle practices, interpersonal interactions, and social norms. The textbooks frequently portray behaviors such as dating, nightlife and leisure practices that differ from dominant Libyan sociocultural norms.

These behaviors are often embedded within engaging narratives or communicative tasks, making them potentially more familiarized to learners through repeated exposure. Such representations may contribute to the normalization of behaviors that differ from local cultural frameworks. At the same time, they may also create a contrast between learners' lived experiences and the realities depicted in the textbooks. For example, students are asked to act out a scenario where "A group of friends trying to persuade a bouncer or security guard to let them into a night club" (Pearson Edexcel, 2017, p. 307).

In addition, "Everything about the bar was of concern. There were a number of men, of a certain age, gathered round a beer-soaked table, playing a card-game" (Cambridge AS and A Level, 2014, p. 62). "It was after football, when he'd drunk a peg" (Pearson Edexcel, 2017, p. 182). The phrase "drunk a peg" typically refers to consuming a measure of alcoholic drink, particularly referring to a small amount of spirits like whiskey or rum.

A lesson in Cambridge AS and A Level (2014) discusses "the most annoying behaviors at rock concerts" (p. 86) with the following picture accompanied.



Language and Content

The category of language and content represents 14.6% of the total instances and includes the use of expressions, narratives, and topics that may be considered sensitive or inappropriate within the Libyan cultural context. This includes references to explicit language, discussions of controversial topics, and descriptions of personal or intimate experiences. In some cases, literary texts and dialogues contain language that may not align with the local cultural expectations of appropriateness, particularly in educational settings.

Additionally, certain topics such as celebrity culture, music, or social issues are presented in ways that reflect Western perspectives, potentially limiting their relevance to local learners. Introducing celebrities' names, along with music described by the book itself, as promoting misogyny and drug abuse may be viewed as culturally sensitive within certain educational contexts. For instance, "Gangster rap", with lyrics that were often misogynistic or that glamorized violence and drug dealing. Later stars include Diddy, Snoop Dogg, Jay-Z, OutKast, Eminem, Kanye West, and Lil Wayne" (Pearson Edexcel, 2017, p. 77).

In Cambridge AS and A Level (2014, p. 197), Shakespeare's use of linguistically offensive language is described as "interesting." Students are encouraged to research additional Shakespearean insults and curses, with the text providing examples to begin with.

Research other Shakespearean insults and curses. Here are two for you to start with:

Thou art as loathsome as a toad.
(Troilus and Cressida)

*Thou clay-brained guts, thou
knotty-pated fool, [...] obscene,
greasy tallow-catch!*
(Henry IV Part I)

Gender Relations

Gender relations account for 6.6% of the total content and include representations of relationships, family structures, and social roles. It normalizes romantic partnerships such as boyfriends, girlfriends, and other inappropriate interactions between males and females outside of marriage. For example, “The boyfriend I ditched last week” (Pearson Edexcel International GCSE, 2017, p. 35). These representations often appear in everyday contexts, such as conversations and narratives that may contribute to their normalization. In addition, the portrayal of non-traditional family structures reflects broader social changes in Western societies but may not align with the cultural and religious expectations of Libyan learners. Although this category has a lower frequency compared to others, its cultural sensitivity makes it particularly significant in the context of this study.



(Pearson Edexcel, 2017)

Dress Styles

Dress styles represent the least frequent category, accounting for 3.6% of the total content. Despite its relatively low occurrence, this category includes visual representations that may conflict with local norms of modesty.

Images in the textbooks often depict clothing styles associated with Western fashion, including attire that may be considered inappropriate in conservative cultural contexts. These representations are typically presented without commentary, reinforcing their implicit normalization. As with other categories, the issue is not the presence of cultural diversity itself but the lack of balance and contextualization in how such content is presented.



Cambridge AS and A Level (2014, p.100)



Cambridge AS and A Level (2014, p.280)

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that English language textbooks used particularly in international schools in Tripoli contain a significant amount of Western cultural content, with religion and rituals, food and drink, and social behavior emerging as the most dominant themes. These findings answer the first and second research questions by demonstrating that cultural representations in the selected textbooks are not evenly distributed, but rather emphasize specific aspects of Western lifestyles and values. This result is consistent with

previous studies conducted in China, Pakistan, and the Middle East, which found that internationally produced ELT materials frequently prioritize Western cultural perspectives while giving limited attention to local cultures (Shah & Pathan, 2016; Guo & Gao, 2023; Mostafaei Alaei & Parsazadeh, 2021).

The results also address the third research question by showing that Western values are represented through both textual and visual content. References to Christianity, alcohol consumption, dating relationships, nightlife, and Western dress styles are often presented as normal aspects of everyday life. These findings can be interpreted through Hall's (2021) Representation Theory, which suggests that educational materials actively construct social meanings through the selective representation of cultural practices and identities. Similarly, the findings reflect Phillipson's (2018) Cultural Imperialism Theory, which suggests that the global spread of English is often accompanied by the transmission of Western cultural values and ideologies. The dominance of Western-oriented content in the analyzed textbooks indicates that language learning materials may function as vehicles for cultural influence beyond their linguistic purpose.

Regarding the fourth research question, the findings suggest that many of the cultural representations conflict with Libyan cultural and Islamic values, particularly in areas related to religion, gender relations, social behavior, and lifestyle practices. These results are consistent with the findings of Seidi et al. (2022), who found that imported ELT textbooks promoting global cultural values influenced learners' social identity and cultural orientations, suggesting that educational materials can play an important role in shaping learners' cultural perceptions.

Furthermore, the presence of culturally sensitive themes without sufficient contextualization highlights the role of the hidden curriculum (Apple, 2019), whereby textbooks implicitly communicate values and social norms that may shape learners' attitudes and perceptions. From a socio-semiotic perspective (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021), both images and texts contribute to these messages by normalizing particular cultural practices and identities.

However, the presence of foreign cultural content should not necessarily be interpreted as a direct threat to local identity. As argued by Krsmanovic (2020), learners



may engage with global cultural representations selectively while maintaining their own cultural values and identities. Therefore, the impact of cultural representation may vary depending on learners' critical awareness, educational environment, and sociocultural background.

Overall, the findings suggest that while ELT textbooks promote intercultural exposure, they also transmit implicit ideological messages that may influence learners' cultural perceptions and understanding of social norms.

Conclusion

This study investigated cultural representations in seven English language textbooks used in international schools in Tripoli, Libya. The analysis identified six major cultural categories, with religion and rituals, food and drink, and social behavior appearing most frequently. The findings demonstrate a significant presence of Western cultural content, represented through both textual and visual elements. While exposure to global cultures can support intercultural awareness, many of the cultural themes identified were found to conflict with Libyan cultural and Islamic values.

The study further shows that the selected textbooks reflect the principles of Cultural Imperialism, Representation Theory, Hidden Curriculum, and Socio-Semiotic Theory by transmitting cultural meanings, values, and ideologies alongside language instruction. Therefore, ELT textbooks should not be viewed as culturally neutral materials but as influential educational tools that shape learners' cultural perceptions. The study highlights the need for greater cultural balance and contextual sensitivity in ELT materials used in Libya to ensure that language learning promotes intercultural understanding while respecting local cultural identity and values.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made. First, greater cultural balance should be considered when selecting English language textbooks used in Libyan international schools. While exposure to global cultures is important, educational materials should also respect local cultural and Islamic values. Textbook evaluation committees within international schools may also play an important role in



assessing the cultural suitability of imported educational materials before classroom implementation.

Second, teachers should encourage critical discussion of culturally sensitive topics to help students compare cultures without undermining their own cultural identity. Teacher training programs should further prepare educators to address culturally sensitive content through critical and balanced classroom discussion. In addition, curriculum developers are encouraged to supplement imported textbooks with locally relevant cultural content that reflects Libyan society and traditions.

Finally, future research should examine teachers' and students' perspectives on cultural representation in ELT materials and investigate the long-term impact of such content on learners' cultural perceptions and identity.

Limitations of the Study

The findings of this study should be interpreted in light of several limitations. The analysis is restricted to a specific sample of textbooks and may not represent all materials used in Libyan international schools. The interpretation of cultural content may involve some subjectivity; however, this was minimized through systematic coding and by using clearly defined cultural and contextual criteria informed by Libyan sociocultural and religious values.

In addition, the study focuses only on content analysis and does not examine students' or teachers' perspectives. These limitations highlight the need for future research that includes interviews, classroom observations, or mixed-method approaches.

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