

THE USE OF CEFR IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION REFORM: FOREIGN TEXTBOOKS AND CULTURAL ISSUES

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Abstract. English language education in Malaysia has undergone reforms to meet economic growth needs and nurture human capital for international connections. Since 2017, foreign textbooks have been introduced to match CEFR standards, but concerns have been raised about their cultural impact. This paper evaluates the cultural elements in CEFR textbooks from primary to secondary levels in Malaysia using a qualitative synthesis method and cross-verification. A total of 13 journal articles were reviewed, revealing that foreign textbooks depict more foreign cultures such as celebration, seasons, transportation, food, attire, characters' names, and Spanish vocabulary. However, some elements are culturally neutral. The use of foreign textbooks promotes diversity, authentic language usage, and opens students' horizons, making them more appreciative of others. Teachers are encouraged to be creative in adapting materials if foreign elements are deemed challenging for students.

Keywords: *CEFR textbooks, cultural elements, foreign culture, local culture*

Introduction

Malaysia has embarked on multiple series of education transformations in its language policy with respect to making English the medium of instruction and English as a subject being taught at learning institutions. These transformations were driven by the national aspiration of developing the country and growing its economy. As such, language planning and policy at supra-macro or macro levels in Malaysia value a common set of experiences and aspirations of the people that derive from embracing the diversity of socioeconomic, religious, and ethics. These shared experiences and aspirations help to form our national identity and unity. Drawing from this basis, the Ministry of Education (MoE) has launched the Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013-2025 to draw up the direction of education against international standards. This document has transmitted the National Education Philosophy's vision and the stakeholders' objective on promoting holistic development of the students from the intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and physical dimensions. MEB has set bilingual proficiency as one of the students' aspirations in which every student must, at the very least, be operationally fluent in both languages; English as the international language of communication and Bahasa Malaysia as the national and unifying language of the country.

Under the language education policy, the English language was designated as a compulsory subject in the national education curriculum be it at the primary or secondary school levels. Over the years, MoE has made incremental investments to transform the standard English language curriculum starting from the Integrated English Language Syllabus for Primary schools, also known as KBSR introduced in 1982, followed by the Standard Curriculum for Primary Schools (SCPS) or KSSR in 2013

(Don et al., 2015) and finally the latest Standards-Based English Language Curriculum (SBELC) (Katawazai et al., 2022). The current shift and reform initiatives are translated into the English Language Education Roadmap Malaysia 2015-2025 which was launched in 2016. In improving the English standard in Malaysia, the current shift has resulted in the adoption of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) in the national English curriculum. According to the Roadmap, extensive research was done on the experiences and lessons from other countries that have adopted the CEFR framework before endorsing its implementation in Malaysia. Alih et al. (2021) stated that there are two primary reasons for adopting the CEFR which are: (i) to keep Malaysia up to date with the international standard, and (ii) adopting the existing framework is more cost-effective than developing a new local framework. Aligning with the country's needs for economic growth, reforming the English language education will nurture human capital who are effective in establishing international connections. Besides, previous English standards in the KBSR and KSSR that were locally produced carry the risk of being obsolete outside of this country. It simply means that what we consider good English or proficient users of English might not be the case in other countries.

On the other hand, CEFR is the global proficiency scale which categorised individuals' language ability according to six bands namely A1, A2; B1, B2; C1, C2 (Council of Europe, 2001). In comparison to the usual segregation of beginner, intermediate, and advanced users, CEFR uses band A to represent basic users, band B for independent users, and band C for proficient users. Level 1 and level 2 in each band are used to further subdivide users' proficiency in the specified band into lower and upper levels respectively. It is the result of research conducted since 1971 by European academics who have been teaching languages and utilizing the combined resources of the continent. The CEFR was created initially to enhance language instruction in Europe, but it is already being used all over the world. To date, many non-English speaking countries such as Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Ecuador, Sweden, Spain, and Finland use CEFR as the foundation in their initiative to revolutionise English language education (Don et al., 2015).

Statement of problem

As part of the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025, the English Language Education Roadmap 2015-2025 conceptualised a major shift in the country's English language education reform. According to Azman (2016), the present reform provides new perspectives on language policy and its way forward because it offers a structured guide inclusive of teacher training for English teacher development, globally standardised assessments, benchmarked curriculum, and instructional materials, as well as a concise definition of language competency standards and outcomes across all levels of education. Hence, this reform is seen as an eye-opener, whole-rounded, and properly conceptualised. The CEFR that acts as the benchmarked standard for this initiative promotes communicative capacity through students-centeredness and action-oriented approach. Instead of the usual norms of focusing on what the students did wrong or using assessment rubrics that employ the concept of deducting students' marks for the mistakes they made, CEFR emphasises the positive views of what the students can do. The student's language proficiency is thus categorised according to their ability.

Moreover, the reform in English language education is crucial following the findings of the Baseline Study conducted by Cambridge English Language Assessment in 2013

that involved various stakeholders from the pre-school up to the pre-university levels. The Baseline Study aimed to provide a clear picture of how the Malaysian English language education system at that time performed against internationally recognised standards. This was a bold move taken by the Ministry of Education as it opened the door to foreign agency to examine every layer of the actual English language planning and curriculum implementation. Unfortunately, it discovered multiple concerns in Malaysian students' performance, education curriculum, and teaching staff. According to the Cambridge report, although aspirational targets certain levels of English proficiency at every stage of students' education, some students still struggled to achieve this target. For instance, 32% of students in Primary Year 6 were below A1 level and 27% of Secondary Form 5 students were below A2 level of the CEFR descriptors. These students were considered as basic users and performed below target because students are supposed to exit secondary schools at A2 level and B1 or B2 levels for secondary schools. Hence, this report suggested classroom teaching and learning that are built upon CEFR to enable monitoring of students' progress. Regretfully, the curriculum carried out in the classroom was also found to be unreal or unexciting because teachers perceived the KSSR national textbooks that were provided by the ministry as useless or irrelevant. This study further confirmed that 87% of teachers felt that KSSR textbooks were inadequate and outdated to be used as teaching materials, hence explaining students' lack of motivation and need to use English for their future. Moreover, novice teachers and the non-English option teachers admitted to suffering from a lack of confidence to adapt lessons and assess students' progress with the KSSR textbooks. These KSSR textbooks were actually developed by the local experts appointed by the ministry.

In response to the Baseline Report and meeting the new standard set by the current language reform, MoE has introduced a revised curriculum and the use of new English textbooks. The present curriculum namely the Standards-Based English Language Curriculum (SBELC) was developed to align to the CEFR and was contextualised in Malaysia. Contrary to previous practice, the new English textbooks were imported and developed by foreign writers. The titles of these new English textbooks are 'Super Minds' for Primary 1 and Primary 2, 'Get Smart Plus 3' for Primary 3, 'Get Smart Plus 4' for Primary 4, 'English Plus 1' for Primary 5, 'Academy Star' for Primary 6, 'Pulse 2' for Secondary 1 and Secondary 2, 'Close-up B1' for Secondary 3, 'Full Blast' for Secondary 4 and 'English Dictionary' for Secondary 5 (Shak et al., 2021a). According to Hutchinson and Waters (1989), the textbook evaluation is a direct, analytical matching process: matching needs to available solutions. Textbooks are vital as they serve as the foundation of many language learning and teaching curricula, and they offer several benefits to both educators and learners (Amerian and Khaivar, 2014). The previous textbooks' inability to match the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) standards is the basis for the decision to replace them. The new foreign textbooks were chosen based on both their academic criteria compliance and excellence (Aziz, 2017). They adhere to the goals and suggestions of the CEFR for assessing linguistic proficiency. However, there have been a lot of discussions among various stakeholders about their concerns with regard to the impact that culture has had on foreign textbooks in the last several years (Ismail, 2023; Abdul Rahim and Jalalian Daghigh, 2020; Hammim, 2018; Sani, 2018; Chow, 2017). These foreign textbooks do not portray local culture and instead overuse foreign cultures, celebration, characters, climate, food, sports, transportation and vocabularies which are difficult for Malaysian

students to make connections (Abbas, 2023; Aripin and Yusoff, 2022; Katawazai et al., 2022; Shak et al., 2021b; Takal et al., 2021; Abdul Rahim and Jalalian Daghigh, 2020; Nawai and Said, 2020). However, there are counterarguments that support the use of these foreign textbooks to promote diversity, authentic language usage and open up students' horizons hence making students be more appreciative of others (Abbas, 2023; Sani, 2018). As such, this paper aims to review the literature to reflect on the cultural elements depicted in the foreign textbooks used in national schools.

Materials and Methods

This paper took the form of secondary research that involved analysing journal articles. As defined by Green et al. (2006), a review article is a journal-length document with the sole goal of synthesising the literature in a field without gathering or evaluating any primary data. Therefore, the study adhered to the six steps of conducting a review article outlined by Templier and Paré (2015). The first step was developing the research questions that this study seeks to answer: (1) What is culturally neutral? (2) What are the textbook selection criteria? and (3) What are the advantages and disadvantages of foreign textbooks used in Malaysian national and vernacular schools? The second step was a literature search using relevant online databases including Google Scholar, Emerald Insight, Litmaps, and ProQuest by entering keywords: English textbook, selection, second language, foreign language, additional language, ESL, EFL, ESOL, SL, teach, teaching, learn, learning, culture, cultural, issue, benefit, challenge, teacher, student. To refine article selection, the researcher filtered for inclusion (step three) and evaluated those studies (step four). *Table 1* provides an overview of these criteria. Applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria listed in *Table 1* led to a decreased number of articles to offer a thorough and comprehensive analysis of the review findings. As a result, a total of 13 journal articles that fulfilled the selection criteria were chosen to be reviewed for gathering data (step five) and interpreting results (step six) in answering research questions.

Table 1. *Article selection criteria.*

Inclusion criterion	Exclusion criterion
Published between the last 10 years (2014 to 2024)	Published more than 10 years ago (before 2014)
Composed in English	Composed in other languages besides English
Focused on the use of English as a second or foreign language	Focused on the use of English as a first language
Explored the use of English textbooks for teaching and learning	Explored the use of textbooks for other subjects besides English
Discussed cultural elements in the use of English textbooks	Explored the use of English books for revision
Available full article	Did not discuss cultural elements in the use of English textbooks
	Available in abstract only

Review of literature

Definition of culturally neutral

Learning the English language and understanding the target language culture are inseparable. Oftentimes, English teachers and learners are unaware that the cultural elements presented in the learning materials might not be unbiased or neutral, hence dominated by foreign cultures. According to Marwa et al. (2021), neutral cultural content is defined as “not dominated by a particular culture”. It means the materials for English Language Teaching (ELT) must consist of both the international and local settings that are relevant and used to learners' lives which will assist them in developing

intercultural communicative competence (Marwa et al., 2021) (*Figure 1*). In order for the ELT materials to be culturally neutral, the ELT topics to be delivered must comprise of three elements namely cultural topics of target cultures, cultural topics of target cultures, and cultural topics of non-English speaking countries. In addition, Marwa et al. (2021) provided the following examples based on their study among English teachers in Indonesia to give a better understanding of layers of cultural topics for neutral cultural representation:

ELT topic: Foods

ELT subtopics: Foods vs cuisine

Students home culture: Talk about *Sajen* in Japanese culture

Target culture: Western businesses such as KFC and McDonald's

Global culture: Food in connection to historical civilisations such Food in connection to historical civilisations such.



Figure 1. Layers of ELT cultural topics.
 Source: Marwa et al. (2021)

Sajen is a food offering ritual that the Javanese do to honour Gods and spirits. Based on the sample given, it can be seen that the topics are relevant to the students and the cultural elements are built up by relating the local Javanese context to a wider scope of Western and other civilisations. Therefore, ELT contents are neither dominated by the local nor foreign cultures. Besides “food”, “cloth”, “friendship”, “advertisement” and “social media” are categorised as culturally neutral ELT topics (Marwa et al., 2021). On the other hand, Hosseinzadeh et al. (2022) stated that culturally neutral meant no connection to any setting. The content is neutral when it is not related to (i) source culture, i.e. the culture of learners’ mother tongue, (ii) target culture of the language learned, and (iii) international culture, i.e. the range of cultural elements aside from of the source and target culture. This definition is more fluid and different from Marwa et al. (2021). As such, the interpretation of culturally neutral for this paper is based on Marwa et al. (2021).

Textbook selection criteria

Commercial textbooks are written for a broad readership with a variety of cultural and geographical backgrounds. As a result, choosing the ideal book for a certain situation such as English language teaching and learning necessitates careful consideration. Aripin and Yusoff (2022) proposed that textbooks should be evaluated to benefit the learners and to find out if CEFR textbooks fulfil the national curriculum with

regards to contents and visual appeal. Bakir and Aziz (2022) also shared the same view that it was essential to select textbooks that could cater to the students' needs based on the selection criteria. In order to assess if the Super Minds textbook is beneficial for Malaysian learners, an evaluation is needed (Bakir and Aziz, 2022). Hadi and Shah (2020) also concurred that the most suitable textbook is one that could cater to the interests and needs of the learners as well as providing them the opportunity to be a self-directed learner. Aripin and Yusoff (2022) suggested that a reliable language textbook evaluation criterion should assess cultural suitability, colours, vocabulary, target audience, activities, and visuals. The variety of textbook selection criteria employed by different countries are presented in the following subtopics.

Turkiye

Şahin (2021) discussed the criteria that English language teachers from different levels of schools used in Türkiye when selecting textbooks. The findings revealed the following focus (*Table 2*). *Table 2* shows that teachers from different schools have different priorities when selecting textbooks. However, the findings presented some similarities that were emphasised when selecting textbooks across all levels: primary, secondary, and high schools. As English are taught as a foreign language in Türkiye, using colourful materials in the instructions will encourage students to think more positively by taking into account the psychological impact of the materials' aesthetic appeal (Şahin, 2021). Besides colour, visual richness also presented in other elements such as shapes and graphic that should be integrated when designing and using the teaching materials. In addition, all teachers placed equal importance on content appropriateness in terms of age and level, price that is worth the quality of the books, comments from others about the textbooks, richness of exercises, and ability to develop four language skills. Moreover, negative attitudes that may arise in learners from an early age are particularly hard to overcome. Additional exercises and attention were necessary to correct old mistakes and change a bad mindset of the learners about the difficulty of mastering the English language. Şahin (2021) explained that age provides information on learners' psychological development and the kinds of stimuli they require. Because of this, it can be beneficial to select materials by taking into account the characteristics that students of different ages can contribute to the learning environment. Although the cultural elements were not listed as one of the textbook selection criteria for primary schools, it was emphasised at a higher school level including the secondary and high schools. Teachers agreed that the textbooks and materials for English lessons ought to portray the target culture which in this case refers to British culture. This helps to create language awareness and understanding of the advantages of using English among more mature learners. Şahin (2021) suggested that it is important to take into account not only the general recommendations but also the national demands, cultural preferences, and personal values of our students when selecting course materials and textbooks.

Table 2. *Textbook Selection Criteria Based on School Levels.*

Criteria	Primary school	Secondary school	High school
Visuals (colour)	/	/	/
Age-appropriate content	/	/	/
Fun	/	X	/
Fulfil the objectives of the course	/	X	/
Compatibility to the smart board	/	/	X
Price	/	/	/

Level-appropriate content	/	/	/
Explanation of topics	X	X	/
Attention grabbing activities	/	/	X
Foster interest towards the language	/	/	X
Comments	/	/	/
Game and song activities	/	/	X
Teaching by doing	/	X	X
Explanation in the Turkish language	/	/	X
Activating students	/	X	X
Richness of exercises	/	/	/
Contain additional materials	/	X	X
Skills development	/	/	/
Topics sequence	/	X	/
Exciting text	X	X	/
Comprehensible examples	X	X	/
Conformity to culture	X	/	/
In keeping with local values	X	X	/
Speaking activities	X	X	/
Exams preparation	X	X	/

Indonesia

Munir et al. (2021) conducted a study to explore the criteria of a good English textbook that suits the context of language teaching for senior high schools in Indonesia. In this country, the selection of textbooks and teaching materials was done by teachers themselves. The results revealed ten indicators that form the criteria of selecting good English textbooks as shown in *Figure 2*.

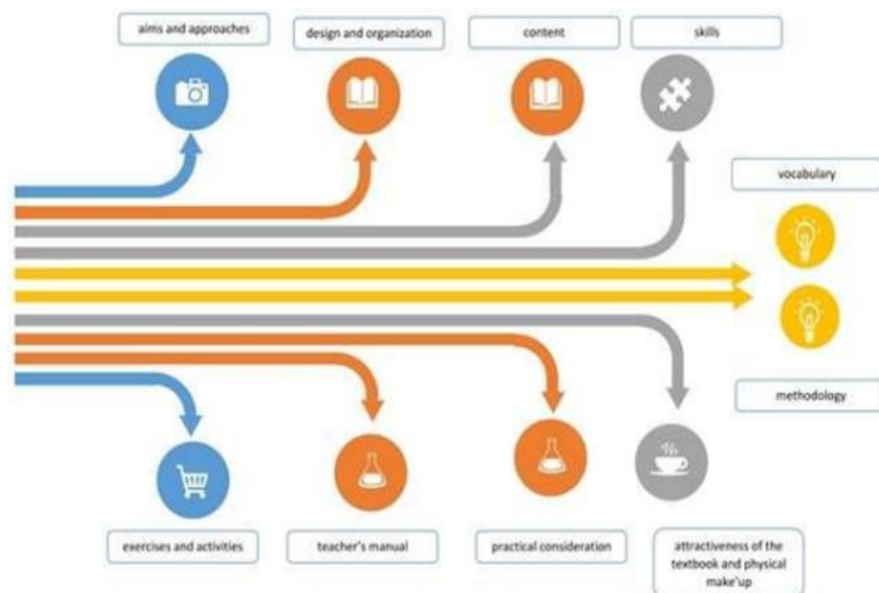


Figure 2. Criteria of an English Textbook.
 Source: Munir et al. (2021).

Criteria 1: Aims and Approaches concerned with examining the teaching and learning environment in which the textbooks will be utilised. Teachers are supposed to be aware of who will be using the materials and pay close attention to their needs. In meeting this criterion, textbooks must reflect the objectives of curriculum, learners' needs, be suitable for teaching and learning purposes, contain differentiated instructional methods, and be resourceful to both teachers and learners.

Criteria 2: Design and Organization looked at the textbook's layout, supplementary tools and equipment, workbook, content structure, and grading. The way textbooks are

arranged explains how much consistency there is in the content and navigate students through it. Hence, the textbooks should be supplemented with other teaching aids including teachers' books, the contents should be properly sequenced, assessments in the textbooks must be suitable to learners, and the layout ought to be presented in an easily comprehensible manner.

Criteria 3: Content refers to the subjects covered in textbooks, the themes chosen, and the instructional methods employed in the textbooks. Furthermore, a textbook's material need to be representative of the cultural contexts in which it is used. This includes the way a textbook presents life, the attitude it may or may not express, and the social and cultural values it spreads. Naturally, the purpose of a language textbook is to aid in the acquisition of language including language skills, components, linguistics, etc. Hence, the content in the textbooks should be authentic, fun, stimulating, culturally appropriate and relatable, and contain wide topic selections.

Criteria 4: Skills meant the textbooks contained grammar aspects, new vocabulary, and four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing to enhance learners' proficiency in the English language. These skills can be presented either in integration with one another or stand-alone.

Criteria 5: Vocabulary concerned with word usage and complexity. Textbooks should introduce new words to learners that are suitable to their levels and foster understanding through repetitions.

Criteria 6: Exercises and Activities emphasised that the tasks in the textbooks should have the capacity to be integrated with the classroom activities. Textbooks must have sufficient explicit examples and tasks which encourage students to communicate, assist reading comprehension, and promote critical thinking.

Criteria 7: Methodology intended at the idea that an excellent textbook supports both the way the material is delivered clearly and the way students acquire the language. Textbooks ought to convey suitable learning styles and students' expectations, fitting techniques to introduce and practise new language items, develop communicative ability, teach a variety of skills, and activate learners' schemata.

Criteria 8: Attractiveness of the Textbook and Physical Make-Up believed that all aspects of the textbooks and learning package are interconnected. Therefore, the cover of the textbooks must be appealing, the content images must look exceptionally good, the presentation of illustrations are simple and improve meaning, and texts are pleasant to read.

Criteria 9: Teacher's Manual were found to be exceptionally important to novice teachers to guide them manoeuvre teaching procedure, monitoring lessons, and making error corrections. Teacher manuals should be able to direct teachers on textbooks and supplementary materials usage, provide accurate answers to activities in the textbooks, lay out the pedagogy, linguistics elements such as vocabulary and grammar rules, and contain culture-specific information.

Criteria 10: Practical Consideration understood that there are no textbooks suitable across all language programmes. However, textbooks should be able to save teachers' and learners' time of using them, as well as assist investments by being cost-effective, durable, and offering attractive design.

Malaysia

In Malaysia, the textbooks for national and vernacular or national-type schools are supplied by the Ministry of Education. However, Roberts et al. (2020) conducted a

study to determine the criteria for an ideal ELT textbook in order to improve English instruction in ESL classrooms. This study discovered eleven criteria that language teachers perceived as crucial in selecting good textbooks as illustrated in *Figure 3*.

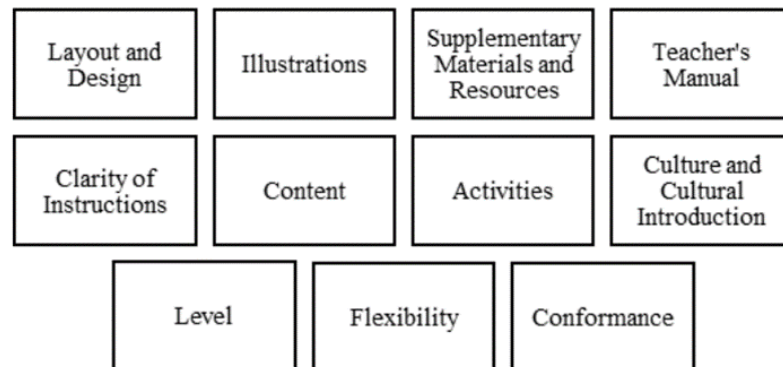


Figure 3. Criteria of a good ELT Textbook.

Source: Roberts et al. (2020).

The first criterion that is layout and design refer to the organisation and presentation of language content and activities, which comprises elements like lesson objectives, a vocabulary list, references, glossaries, and details related to grammar and skills, language structure, functions, and topics. A quality ELT textbook should have a well-organised material presentation where CEFR descriptors are present and the pages should not be too packed so that students can easily turn pages and browse the books. The second criterion meant material was illustrated by colours, charts, models, images, and photographs to provide context and clarity. An ELT textbook's illustrations should be sensitive to cultural differences and support learners, particularly the less proficient ones, in addition to being aesthetically pleasing. Thus, it is believed that illustrations are a helpful teaching and learning tool, especially for those who learn best visually. Students are more interested in visual aids like graphs and graphics than in long texts. The third criterion of supplemental materials refers to resources and materials for skill development. These materials may comprise a set of communicative exercises, as well as practice exercises in grammar, phonology, and vocabulary, as well as materials intended for use by educators. Teaching and learning should be aided and enhanced by these resources and materials.

Teacher's manual, the fourth criterion, was useful to teachers as it contained the answers to the activities, strategies for managing the language resources, proposals for substitute activities, and recommendations for successful language programs. In return, teachers become more effective and confident through the amount of guidance they receive from the manual. The fifth criterion, clarity and instructions, is concerned with having all the exercises, activities, and tasks explained thoroughly and appropriately to the learners' level so that all work can be done independently in the absence of teachers. Clarity helped learners comprehend the instructions and what are expected of them. Sixth criterion on content looked at language items, skills, and communicative strategies that learners need to acquire. Hence, textbook contents must be current, contain a combination of local and foreign culture for international exposure, and integrate all four language skills listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Activities which are the seventh criterion, are referred to diverse classroom practices aimed at communicative language and different levels of learners. Through these activities students use the

language to accomplish a stipulated goal, engage with others, become more creative and critical in their thinking.

The eighth criterion, culture and cultural introduction, meant that a good quality textbook did not restrict learners to accustomed culture but also introduce them to a variety of other cultures. This study stated that imported textbooks lacked cultural variations that did not reflect the richness of multiracial in Malaysia and failed to incorporate local and Asian cultures by overemphasising on the Westerns. Hence, textbooks should provide learners with knowledge and understanding of source culture, target culture and international culture without being domineering by British and American cultures. The ninth criterion, level, focused at the suitability of textbooks to the learners' age and language ability. The contents and exercises in the textbook must be varied so that students with different skill or proficiency levels may attempt to understand and take on the various sets that are made accessible to them. The ninth criterion, level, focused at the suitability of textbooks to the learners' age and language ability. The contents and exercises in the textbook must be varied so that students with different skill or proficiency levels may attempt to understand and take on the various sets that are made accessible to them. The last criterion of conformance dealt with the textbook's ability to adhere to predetermined national aspirations, curricula, and education policies. An ELT textbook ought to support teachers in meeting the learning objectives and align nicely with the national curriculum.

Analysis of textbook selection criteria

It was evidence that different countries and studies present different criteria when selecting textbooks for English language teaching and learning. However, there are certain elements in the criteria that were found to be the common ground (*Table 3*). First and foremost, all studies emphasised on the ability of the textbooks to meet the needs of the learners, lesson objectives, national aspirations, curricula fitting, and stipulated policies for education. Secondly, the importance of textbooks to be properly organised and designed was also stressed by all countries. Thirdly, the appropriateness of the contents was also prominent across all studies. While Malaysia and Turkiye explicitly listed cultural elements as independent criteria in textbook selection, Indonesia manifested this in the content criterion. Hence, all countries agreed that a good textbook should not favour any specific culture even the locals, and thus must also present target culture and other foreign cultures like the ones from neighbouring or regional countries which are comprehensible and relatable by learners. Fourthly, textbooks should contain visuals and illustrations that attract learners and improve their understanding of the content as commonly found in all studies. Last but not least, the richness of exercises and activities in the textbook to enforce language learning is the shared focus of these studies. In summary, there are five prominent criteria for textbook selection. As such, cultural elements were not the sole determinant of selecting a good textbook for English lessons. However, it should be given adequate consideration as cultural appropriateness contributes to effective and optimal textbook usage among teachers as well as learners.

Table 3. Comparison of Textbook Selection Criteria.

Studies/authors [Countries]	Sahin (2021) [Turkiye]	Munir et al. (2021) [Indonesia]	Roberts et al. (2020) [Malaysia]
Shared Criteria	Fulfil the objectives of the course Topics sequence Level-appropriate content, Age-appropriate content & Conformity	Aims and approaches Design and organisation Content (including culture) Attractiveness of the	Conformance Layout and design Content & culture and cultural introduction,

	to culture Visuals (colour) Attention grabbing activities, Game and song activities & Speaking activities, Richness of exercises	textbook and physical make- up Exercises and activities	Illustrations Activities
Distinguished Criteria	Fun Compatibility to the smart board Price Explanation of topics Foster interest towards the language Comments Teaching by doing Explanation in the Turkish language Activating students Contain additional materials Skills development Exciting text Comprehensible examples In keeping with local values Exams preparation	Skills Vocabulary Methodology Teacher's manual Practical consideration	Supplemental materials Teacher's manual Clarity and instructions Level Flexibility

Cultural content in foreign textbook used in Malaysian national and vernacular schools

In this section, findings from previous studies will discuss the cultural aspects of the CEFR textbook and the criteria selection of textbooks. The discussion of textbooks is considered part of the material policy proposed by Kaplan and Baldauf (2005), as material policy is related to the contents used in teaching a language (Zein, 2012). The senior assistant director in the Research Development and Innovation Centre at the Teacher Training Institute of Malaysia in Cyberjaya, Siti Bahijah Bakhtiar, commented that the procurement of CEFR textbooks is due to the mismatch of local textbooks with the CEFR levels (Sani, 2018). The University of Malaya English Language and Linguistics Former Dean and Chair of the Education Ministry's English Language Standards and Quality Council (ELSQC), Professor Zuraidah Mohd Don, mentioned that producing high-quality textbooks required five years; hence, she suggested Malaysians adopt CEFR textbooks first and, in the meantime, generate our own outstanding resources that are aligned with the CEFR levels (Sani, 2018). The CEFR textbooks were formally introduced in the classroom in 2018. The CEFR textbooks are shown in *Figure 4*. There was no research done on two CEFR textbooks: English Plus 1 for Year 5 and Academy Stars for Year 6, to assess their cultural issues. Hence, the literature review focuses on the Super Minds, Get Smart, and Pulse 2 textbooks.

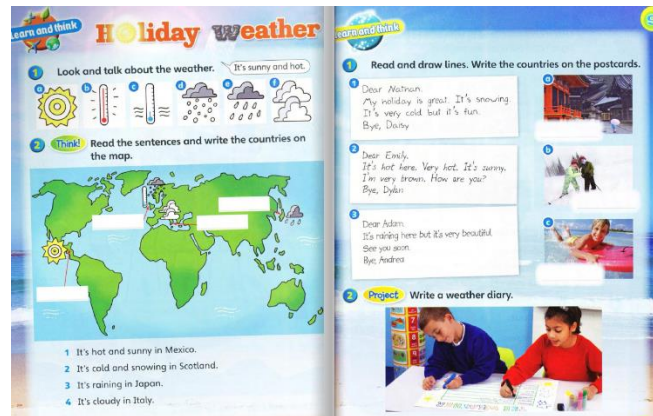


Figure 4. CEFR textbooks from Primary Year 1 until Secondary Form 2.

Weaknesses of super minds

Currently, primary and secondary schools use textbooks that are published by Cambridge University Press. There are nine topics in the Super Minds textbook, and they are divided into two for the use of Year 1 and Year 2 (Aripin and Yusoff, 2022). The first four topics are to be covered in Year 1 while the next five topics are to be covered in Year 2 (Aripin and Yusoff, 2022). This textbook does not have sufficient content in the Malaysian context (Bakir and Aziz, 2022). Nawai and Said (2020) concurred that the Super Minds CEFR textbook does not have Malaysian culture but only contains foreign culture, but they did not provide any examples. Katawazai et al. (2022) also uncovered that the Super Minds CEFR textbook is centred around European culture and that Malaysian culture is not evident. Katawazai et al. (2022) also revealed that 30 English teachers from Johor State in Malaysia who are teaching primary Years 1 and Year 2 stated that the previous KSSR textbook is more culturally appropriate than the CEFR Super Minds textbook and that 27 of them have the opinion that it is crucial for the English textbooks to incorporate Malaysian culture. Bakir and Aziz (2022) gave examples of the four seasons and Halloween celebration from the Super Minds CEFR textbook as foreign cultures, as shown in Figure 5. Halloween is not taught as a topic in the book; it is only a cut-out activity. Teachers can make a decision whether to use the cut-out materials in the classroom or substitute the Halloween cut-out with the cut-out

of other celebrations in Malaysia. The four seasons activity is not that difficult even though students need to identify four countries from a world map as there are only four countries and the weather images on the world map serve as a clue to locate the four countries. The four weather images for the four countries are different on the world map.



Four seasons



Halloween cut-out activities.

Figure 5. The Four seasons and Halloween cut-out activities.

Aripin and Yusoff (2022) conducted research on 180 Year 1 and 2 English teachers across Malaysia through convenient sampling and discovered that 55% of the teachers are of the opinion that the Super Minds CEFR textbook is irrelevant and unrealistic for Malaysian learners, while 44% of the teachers think that the Super Minds textbook is realistic. 66% of the teachers perceived that the Super Minds CEFR textbook is biased against particular cultures, but the research did not mention which culture. Aripin and Yusoff (2022) also pointed out that the contents of the CEFR textbook, Super Minds, were not altered to fit the culture in Malaysia. Aripin and Yusoff (2022) gave another example from the Super Minds CEFR textbook from Unit 4 Lunchtime. They mentioned that the European food for lunch, such as pizza and steak, in the textbook is foreign to Malaysian learners in rural areas, as Malaysians do not eat pizza or steak for lunch (Aripin and Yusoff, 2022). Unit 4 Lunchtime from the Super Minds CEFR textbook is shown in Figure 6. Aripin and Yusoff (2022) also called attention to the characters in the Super Minds CEFR textbooks, Flash, Whisper, Thunder, and Misty, that exhibit foreign characteristics and do not have a connection with Malaysian

learners, as shown in *Figure 7*. For instance, the characters wear different attire to school daily, which is the opposite of the public schools in Malaysia, as Malaysian learners wear similar school uniforms to school daily. However, we do not think that the attire would cause an issue as the attire is not a requirement to understand a text or an activity. Furthermore, this is also an opportunity for Malaysian students to learn about the Western culture where students in the Western countries are allowed to wear house attire to school. Aripin and Yusoff (2022) put forward their stance that foreign components serve as additional knowledge which we also agree with.

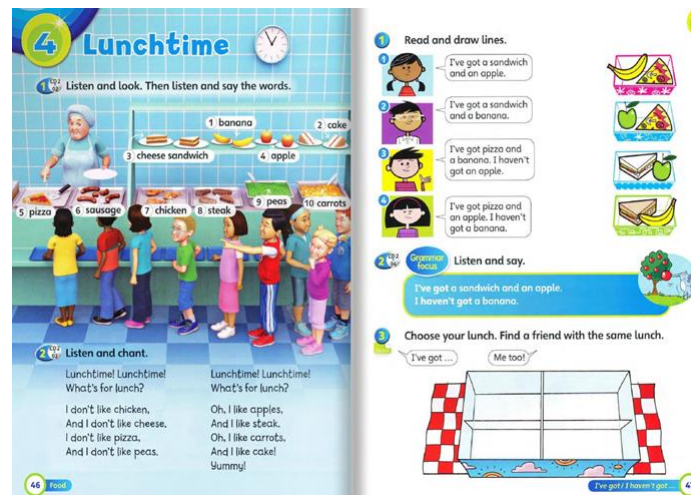


Figure 6. Unit 4 lunch time from *Super Minds* textbooks.



Figure 7. Characters in the *Super Minds* textbook.

Strengths of super minds

On the contrary, Aripin and Yusoff (2022) discovered that the activities in the *Super Minds* CEFR textbook allowed learners to participate actively in class instead of listening passively to the teacher. Aripin and Yusoff (2022) also found out that the *Super Minds* CEFR textbook eases the majority of the teachers in planning effective English lessons. Hadi and Shah (2020) also found the same finding when they conducted research on 116 primary English teachers from urban and rural areas who teach English to Year 1, 2, 3, and 4 learners in Malaysia. Aripin and Yusoff (2022) gave two activity examples from the book: 'Listen and Look' and 'Listen and Chant' from Unit 3 Pet Show, as shown in *Figure 8*. There are audio files provided for these two

activities where teachers can play and conduct the lesson. In addition, there is a step-by-step teacher's guide provided for each page, which is beneficial for the teachers to plan successful English lessons (Aripin and Yusoff, 2022). Katawazai et al. (2022) found that the CEFR Super Minds textbook is in touch with 21st-century skills, while the previous KSSR textbook is not up-to-date.



Figure 8. *Listen and Look' and 'Listen and 'Chant' activities from Super Minds textbook.*

This paragraph is the finding of the study by Aripin and Yusoff (2022) on 180 Year 1 and 2 English teachers across Malaysia. In the aspects of vocabulary, listening, speaking, and grammar, teachers across Malaysia think those aspects were good with 71%, 65%, 63%, and 63%, respectively (Aripin and Yusoff, 2022). Reading has the lowest percentage, which is 53%, as teachers do not think that this aspect is good in Super Minds CEFR textbooks. It was surprising to know that 81% of the teachers felt that the Super Minds CEFR textbook imparted new knowledge to the learners; 77% of them stated that the Super Minds CEFR textbook piques the learner's interest and elevates the motivation of the learners in learning English. The learners are motivated because there are quizzes, games, singing, and chanting in the textbook, as shown in *Figure 9* to *Figure 12*. In sum, the content quality of the Super Minds CEFR textbook is average to good. Despite the lack of Malaysian culture, the content of the textbook assists teachers in planning interactive lessons that appeal to the students.



Figure 9. Quizizz.



Figure 10. Games.

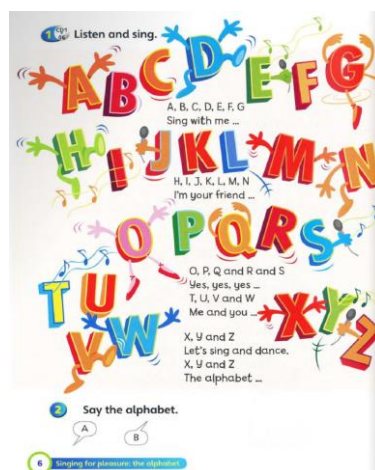


Figure 11. Singing.

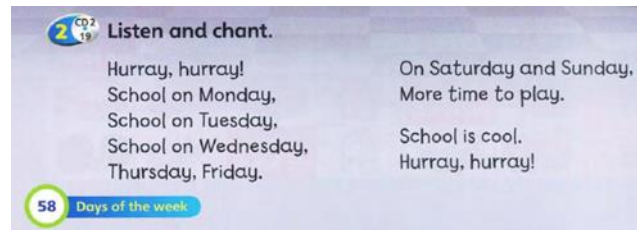


Figure 12. Chanting.

Weaknesses of pulse 2

The Pulse 2 CEFR textbook is the textbook for Secondary Form 1 and Form 2 learners in Malaysia. Unit 1 to 5 are to be taught to Form 1 learners while Unit 6 onwards are to be taught to Form 2 learners. Shak et al. (2021a) brought to light that the CEFR Pulse 2 textbook contained Spanish culture, words and phrases as this book is meant for Spanish learners. Malaysian learners will find it difficult to make connections as Spanish has a distinct culture and manner of life (Shak et al., 2021a). For instance, activity 5 on page 8 asked learners to identify 'poster' in Spanish and 'lápiz' in English. The Spanish word for 'poster' is 'cartel' while the English word for 'lápiz' is 'pencil'. Both questions required learners to have prior knowledge about Spanish in order to match the questions to the answers correctly. Thus, Malaysian learners will find this challenging because they do not learn Spanish at school or kindergarten (Shak et al., 2021a). Activity 5 is shown in Figure 13. In our point of view, the two Spanish words only appear in two questions which the teacher could remove and replace the two words with another language that the Malaysian learners could understand. Shak et al. (2021b) indicated that page 75 in Pulse 2 as shown in Figure 14 required Malaysian learners to first comprehend the importance of an Amish teenager, Andrew Miller, visiting London in order to complete the activities that come after the reading text. However, we do not think this is necessary for activities 2, 3, and 4, as shown in Figure 15, as answers could be found in the text itself. Even for the activity with the title 'Finished' and the question, 'Do you think Andrew will enjoy his trip to Britain? Why (not)?' shown in Figure 15. Answers could be deduced by reading the text. The text mentioned that Andrew likes listening to rock music, hunting, and ice-fishing. In addition, the text also stated that Andrew will have the chance to visit a sports club, go to a music festival, and try some traditional British sports. Therefore, students could share their views by mentioning that 'I think Andrew will enjoy Britain because he likes sports such as hunting and ice-fishing back in Mississippi, and now he gets to visit a British sports club and play British sports. So, I think Andrew will enjoy his time there very much'.

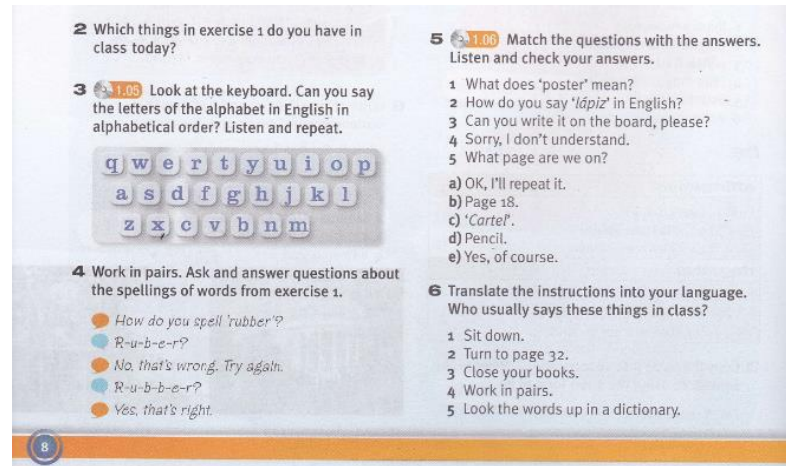


Figure 13. Question 5 in Pulse 2.



Figure 14. Reading text on page 75 in Pulse 2.

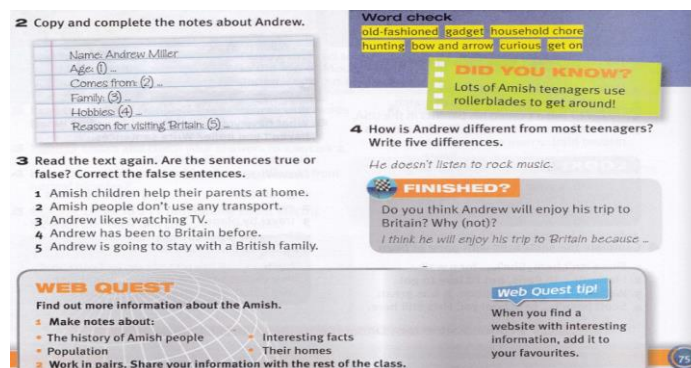


Figure 15. Questions on page 75 in Pulse 2.

Another item highlighted by Shak et al. (2021b) is celebrations in Unit 1, page 4 of Pulse 2. Their concern is that some Malaysian learners might not know what Easter (Figure 16) and Valentine's Day (Figure 17) are. These two celebrations are not celebrated by Muslim students in Malaysia but it is celebrated by some non-Muslim

students in Malaysia. These two celebrations could be foreign to Muslim students but are not foreign for the non-Muslim students. The question about Easter and Valentine's Day are fairly simple as the question only requires students to talk to each other and tell each other the dates of a few celebrations. This could be served as a general knowledge as these celebrations are celebrated around the world. Teachers can always remove the given celebrations in the textbook and replace them with celebrations in Malaysia. The next item that Shak et al. (2021b) pointed out is the use of unfamiliar vocabulary such as 'jumper' and 'trainers' on page 5 of Pulse 2 as shown in *Figure 18*. They added that Malaysian learners are not wearing these to school, and Malaysians say these words using another vocabulary. Malaysians usually use the term 'sweater' to refer to a 'jumper' and 'sneaker' or 'sports shoe' to refer to a pair of 'trainers'. In our opinion, this is a good opportunity for students to expand their vocabulary. Furthermore, there are only two words in the text which do not impede the understanding of the text. Aripin and Yusoff (2022) also found some British contents that are foreign to the learners such as the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, second-hand shopping and car boot sales in Pulse 2 as shown in *Figure 19*.

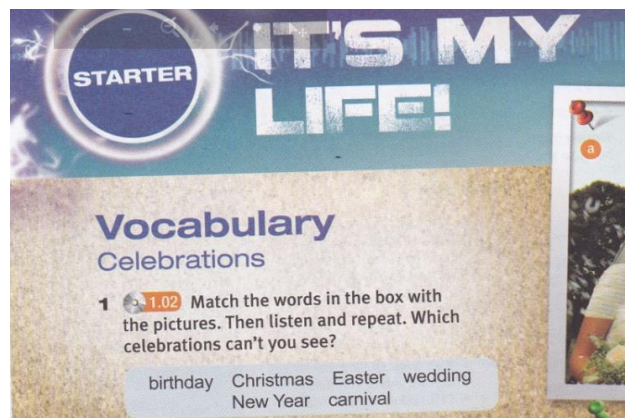


Figure 16. Easter on page 4 of Pulse 2.

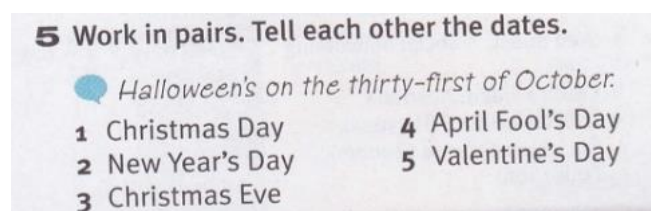


Figure 17. Valentine's Day on page 4 of Pulse 2.



Figure 18. Jumper' and 'trainers' on page 5 of Pulse 2.



Figure 19. Edinburgh Fringe Festival, second-hand shopping and car boot sales.

There are three categories of culture: source culture, target culture and other cultures. The source culture refers to Malaysian culture. The target culture refers to native countries such as the United Kingdom (UK), United States (US), Ireland, Australia and Canada (Shak et al., 2021b). The source culture in the CEFR Pulse 2 textbook is 0% (Shak et al., 2021b; Abdul Rahim and Jalalian Daghigh, 2020). This book contains only target and other cultures with 55% and 45% respectively as shown in Table 4 (Shak et al., 2021b; Abdul Rahim and Jalalian Daghigh, 2020). Abdul Rahim and Jalalian Daghigh (2020) discovered that the previous KSSR textbook is more glocal than the CEFR textbook Pulse 2 based on the Byram's Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) framework. A textbook is considered glocal when it has local culture or the source culture, target culture and other cultures (Abdul Rahim and Jalalian Daghigh, 2020).

Table 4. Culture Distribution in CEFR and KSSR Books.

Books	Culture	Percentage
Pulse	Source culture (Malaysia)	0%
	Target culture (UK, US, Canada, Ireland, Australia)	55%
	Other cultures	45%
KSSR	Source culture (Malaysia)	67%
	Target culture (UK, US, Canada, Ireland, Australia)	12%
	Other cultures	21%

Strengths of pulse 2

The Irish beliefs and superstitions on page 88 in Pulse 2 as shown in Figure 20 are seen as positive elements as one of its activities allow learners to find similarities and differences between their beliefs with Irish beliefs (Shak et al., 2021b).

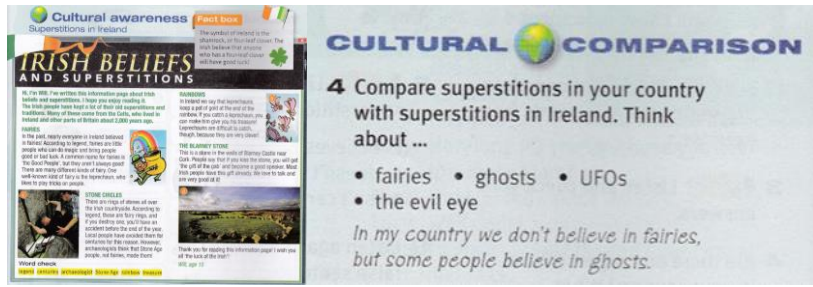


Figure 20. Irish beliefs and Superstitions on page 88 in Pulse 2.

Weaknesses of get smart plus 3 and 4

Get Smart Plus 3 and 4 are the CEFR textbooks for Year 3 and 4 respectively. Takal et al. (2021) analysed Get Smart Plus 3 while Abbas (2023) analysed Get Smart Plus 4. Abbas (2023) noticed that 'Carlos' and 'Greg' are often used in the Get Smart Plus 4 book as shown in Figure 21. Carlos is from Mexico while Greg is unknown. These names are pretty common in Malaysia as some non-Muslim Malaysians also carry these names. Besides, students would have been exposed to these names through English movies, series, dramas or videos on YouTube or TikTok. Takal et al. (2021) also pointed out a similar issue in Get Smart Plus 3. Another item being pointed out by Abbas (2023) is that Unit 5 does not present any Malaysian food as shown in Figure 22. Unit 5 only consists of global food and fruit such as crisps, cereal, juice, cake, milk, lemonade, apple, orange, pineapple, kiwi, peach, pear (Abbas, 2023). Takal et al. (2021) also noticed a similar issue about food in the Get Smart Plus 3 Unit 6 book as shown in Figure 23. Actually all these fruit, juice, and dairy are not foreign to Malaysian students as all of these fruit, juice and dairy can be found in the supermarkets and local stores in Malaysia.



Figure 21. 'Carlos' and 'Greg'.
 Source: Abbas (2023).

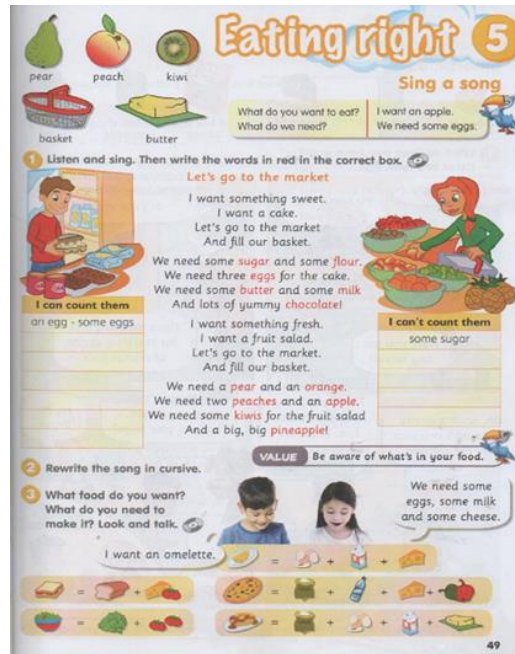


Figure 22. No Malaysian food.
 Source: Abbas (2023).



Figure 23. No Malaysian Food.
 Source: Takal et al. (2021).

In addition, Abbas (2023) also noticed that Malaysian transportation is not evident in this book on page 62 as shown in Figure 24. This page only mentioned snowmobiles in countries that snow, gondolas in Italy and Tuk-tuk in Thailand (Abbas, 2023). Regarding this, teachers can also add the information about trishaw from Melaka to teach the students. Getting to know the transports in other countries serves as a good exposure to knowledge about the world as there is not a lot of special transportation in

Malaysia. Takal et al. (2021) conducted a study among 38 primary teachers from the national and national-type schools in Johor Bahru and discovered that 32% of the teachers have the opinion that the Get Smart book contains more culture from the West but not Malaysia. Takal et al. (2021) suggested incorporating Malaysian culture in the Get Smart Plus 3 although the majority of the teachers are satisfied with the Get Smart Plus 3 book.

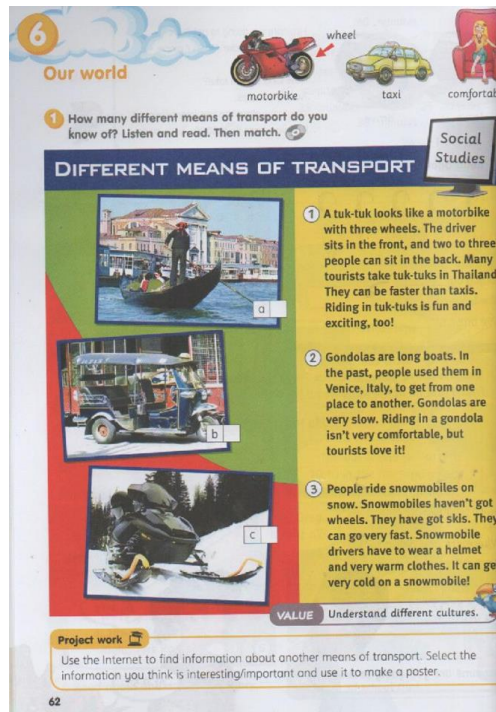


Figure 24. No Malaysian transport.
 Source: Abbas (2023).

Strengths of get smart plus 3 and 4

Abbas (2023) noticed that the first unit on page 5 introduces different nationalities which acknowledge the diversity of culture as shown in Figure 25. The page shows flags from Malaysia, the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), Mexico, Brazil, Korea and China. Furthermore, the song lyrics mentioned Aina from Malaysia, Anastasia from the UK, Paolo from Brazil and Jill from the US. Another item that is related to Malaysians is the Malaysia International Gastronomy Festival (Abbas, 2023) as shown in Figure 26. Abbas (2023) suggested that the CEFR textbooks could integrate local cultural content to have more thorough teaching materials. Abbas (2023) stated that the Get Smart Plus 4 has made a conscious choice in integrating cultures from different countries; however, the variety of English is not evident in this book to attain the goal of having English as an International Language (EIL).



Figure 25. Different nationalities.



Figure 26. Malaysia Gastronomy Festival.

Different opinions about CEFR textbook

Opposing views

There are two opposing views on the CEFR textbooks: one group does not support the use of the CEFR textbooks, and another group supports the use of CEFR textbooks. This section will look at the opposing views on the CEFR textbooks. Language specialists have the concern that young learners might not be able to grasp the British contents in the Super Minds textbook (Aripin and Yusoff, 2022). Some of the British contents that are foreign to the learners mentioned by Aripin and Yusoff (2022) were Edinburgh Festival, Red Poppy Day, car boot sales or second-hand shops. A politician mentioned that the CEFR textbook for Secondary Form 1 students, Pulse 2, was for Spanish learners, not Malaysian learners (Aripin and Yusoff, 2022). The late President of the Malaysian English Language Teaching Association (MELTA), Professor Ganakumaran Subramaniam stressed the importance of aligning the CEFR textbooks

with the philosophy of National Education, curriculum of the English language pedagogy of teachers, issues of publication and so forth (Sani, 2018). Professor Ganakumaran also shared his view that the standard of English could not be improved only with just the change of textbooks. An Associate Professor from UiTM, Dr. Wan Norliza Wan Mustapha, also agreed with Professor Ganakumaran that textbooks alone do not help learners become proficient learners but only with practice (Aripin and Yusoff, 2022). Professor Nor Faridah Abd Manaf, IIUM Professor of Literature, raised her concern that the CEFR textbooks might be detrimental to Malaysian learners (Sani, 2018). Professor Nor Faridah also added that the implementation just further confirmed that Malaysians do not have the confidence in locally produced textbooks due to inferiority issues and colonialism mentality (Sani, 2018). An Associate Professor at the Faculty of Education, Universiti Malaya, Dr. Zuwati Hasim commented that Malaysian learners should first learn about Malaysian culture and Malaysia and it is not necessary to study foreign cultures in the classroom (Aripin and Yusoff, 2022). Shak et al. (2021b) found that 2 teachers from Terengganu indicated their preference for local textbooks as it is relevant to their lives and can activate their prior knowledge.

Supporting views

On the other hand, there is another group which supports the use of CEFR textbooks. The Principal Assistant Director in the Research Development and Innovation Centre at the Teacher Training Institute of Malaysia in Cyberjaya, Siti Bahijah Bakhtiar, put forward that CEFR textbooks are economical and the textbooks could widen learners' horizons on different cultures and provide opportunity for learners to apply English in both local and foreign contexts (Sani, 2018). The Former Dean of Faculty of Language and Linguistics of University of Malaya and Chair of the Education Ministry's English Language Standards and Quality Council (ELSQC), Professor Zuraidah Mohd Don also concurred that Malaysian learners needed global exposure and that all subjects should have exposure to foreign cultures, not just the English subject (Sani, 2018). 20 teachers from the study conducted by Katawazai et al. (2022) shared the same view as Professor Zuraidah where foreign culture is also important as it provides an opportunity for learners to learn about other geographical locations and well-known places. Professor Zuraidah also reckoned that education should not be limited to only a book and a geographical location (Sani, 2018). She said we should appreciate cultures around the world so that our culture could be appreciated by other counterparts in the world (Sani, 2018). She also stated that learning about other cultures does not make Malaysians lose their identity (Sani, 2018). Shak et al. (2021b) interviewed 8 teachers from the urban (Kuala Terengganu), semi-urban (Kemaman) and rural area (Hulu Terengganu) in Terengganu and found that 6 of them indicated their preference for foreign books which are adapted to Malaysian culture. They opted for foreign books but with the injection of Malaysian culture as the foreign textbooks contain authentic language, provide more exposure, have more activities and questions similar to the examination.

Results and Discussion

Most of the literature confirmed that the cultural issues revolve around names, attire, food, festival, season, weather, countries and transportation. The names are usually western names such as Greg, Carlos or Anna and only Get Smart Plus 4 has one Malaysian name which is Aina. The attire in the CEFR textbooks is usually casual wear

from home and the characters change their attire every day which is culturally different from the Malaysian learners as Malaysian learners wear school uniform to school every day. Apart from the attire, food presented in the CEFR textbook are mostly western food such as cereal, milk, pizza and so forth. The findings from previous studies suggest that these might not be an issue for the urban Malaysian learners but this might cause difficulty for learners living in the rural area. However, the topics on food, cloth and friendship are culturally neutral based on the definition of this paper which was adopted from Marwa et al. (2021). Moreover, these topics are relatable to learners and did not impair their understanding of the language aspects. For instance, cereal, milk and pizza are not entirely alien to learners as these types of meals have become easily available in most local shops. Besides, Malaysians are accustomed to bread including pizza as we have our own version of “roti pizza” which could even be found at the night market. In addition, names like Greg, Carlos or Anna are common and not difficult to pronounce. Learners, even the young ones, could have encountered such names in cartoons or other television shows that they watched. The words to describe casual wear like jumpers and trainers which are referred to differently among Malaysians could actually be useful. These differences could promote vocabulary variation and thus help expand learners’ range of words. Hence, these cultural contents are appropriate to the level of learners.

In contrast, the festivals in the CEFR textbooks are mostly European celebrations such as Valentine’s Day, Easter, and so on. This could also pose some difficulty to learners who do not celebrate these festivals. Next, the seasons and weather are foreign to Malaysian learners if they have not travelled abroad as the seasons include winter, autumn, spring and summer. When learners are asked to talk about the weather and seasons, it is difficult for them to provide the right vocabulary to describe the weather and the seasons. Most of the contents are related to European countries and rarely about Malaysia. Last but not least, the mode of transportation does not include the transportation in Malaysia. These could be challenging for students to understand as not all students have the exposure or experience foreign festivals, four seasons, and transportation that are associated to foreign seasons. Hence, proper guidance from teachers is crucial to provide context to the students and relate these to their pre-existing knowledge and daily lives.

Unfortunately, certain foreign textbooks like Pulse 2 are not culturally neutral because it was dominated by a particular culture. According to Marwa et al. (2021), cultural topics for neutral cultural representation should consist of three layers: learners’ home culture, target culture, and global culture. However, Pulse 2 is biased towards target and global culture as it did not portray any local culture. In the research done by Hadi and Shah (2020) on 116 primary English teachers, they were aware about the lack of Malaysian culture in the CEFR textbook and they made changes to the content to suit their learners. Similar situation also occurred in Indonesia in which the researcher proposed localised materials for the learners (Zein, 2012). Ponnusamy et al. (2021) also recommended the integration of local culture into the CEFR textbooks to overcome this issue. Hadi and Shah (2020) suggested teachers be creative and not just rely on the textbook. When teachers were asked to make a decision on their favourite textbook: CEFR textbook, KSSR textbook or CEFR textbook with local culture, their choice is the CEFR textbook with local culture (Shak et al., 2021b). Hence, to make the materials appeal to the local culture, teachers could adapt their teaching materials to suit the learners’ needs and levels.

These foreign textbooks fulfilled other criteria of good textbooks. The illustrations and colours in most of foreign textbooks are so vivid that appeal to the target (young) learners. The review of previous literature also confirmed that CEFR textbooks help teachers to plan their lessons efficiently and ease their burden (Aripin and Yusoff, 2022; Hadi and Shah, 2020). Therefore, these textbooks are useful in achieving the lesson objective and aim of the curriculum. In sum, these textbooks are good sources for English language teaching as the majority of the teachers have good feedback about the CEFR textbooks apart from the cultural issue.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are many cultural issues in the CEFR textbooks which require the attention of the teachers. Teachers could adjust and amend the content to suit the needs of their learners. In addition, textbooks should be selected based on the criteria to meet the requirements of the students (Bakir and Aziz, 2022). However, there is no existence of a single textbook that could cater to the learning needs of all learners. As Hadi and Shah (2020) mentioned there is no flawless book that could cater to every learner. In order to help teachers grasp the concept of CEFR and use the textbook confidently, it would be good to provide professional development to the teachers (Nawai and Said, 2020). Nevertheless, even though this study provides insights into the cultural issues portrayed in the foreign textbooks used in national and national-type schools, there is still some research gap that needs attention. The previous studies only reviewed Primary Years 1, 2, 3, 4, and Secondary Forms 1 and 2. Therefore, it is suggested that future studies could examine the cultural elements in other English foreign textbooks, namely Primary Year 5 and 6, as well as Secondary Forms 3, 4, and 5. Besides, future studies should also explore the way teachers overcome these cultural issues in their classroom instructions to ensure effective lessons are taking place.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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