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Research Paper

Visual Cultural Representation in Imported ELT Textbooks: A Case Study from Mongolian Classrooms

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Abstract

This study investigates the visual cultural representation in *Wider World S Starter*, a Pearson Primary English Language Teaching (ELT) textbook used in 5th-grade English classes in Mongolian classrooms, to evaluate its alignment with source, target, and international cultures. Employing qualitative visual content analysis, including denotation and connotation frameworks and a rubric-based assessment, the research assesses how effectively visual elements reflect Mongolian culture alongside other cultural categories. The analysis reveals that target culture visuals dominate the textbook (77%), followed by international culture (23%), with no visuals representing Mongolian (source) culture. This lack of integration undermines cultural relevance and may reduce student engagement, motivation, and identity development. These findings highlight the need for localized content and call for collaborative textbook development involving local educators and cultural experts. The study contributes to the growing discourse on culturally responsive ELT materials and underscores the importance of embedding local culture meaningfully within globalized educational resources to support inclusive and effective English language learning.

Keywords: Cultural Relevance, Visual Analysis, ELT Textbook

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1. Introduction

English has become a vital global tool for communication, influencing language, culture, and identity across the world (Tsui & Tollefson, 2006). This research investigates the cultural relevance of visual elements in the *Wider World* series, a Pearson English language textbook specially adapted for Mongolian learners and used in 5th-grade English classes in public schools. Since the early 1990s, when Mongolia transitioned to a democratic society, the demand for English education has rapidly increased. The Mongolian government recognized the necessity of English as an international language, making it a compulsory subject across all levels of education (Dovchin, 2015, 2019). In response, Pearson's English language textbooks were introduced to provide a globally competitive standard of English education, aiming to bridge the gap between public and private schools, which previously used different teaching materials (Pearson, 2015).

In recent years, Pearson has emerged as one of the most dominant players in the global English language education market, producing standardized ELT textbooks used in over 160 countries (Pearson, 2015). While this global reach promotes consistency and access to high-quality materials, it raises concerns about the cultural neutrality and adaptability of such resources. Critics argue that internationally published ELT textbooks often prioritize Western norms and perspectives, resulting in a lack of cultural resonance for students in non-Western contexts (Gholami et al., 2012; Gray, 2010). Based on the textbooks analyzed in this study, Pearson's *Wider World* series is used in 5th-grade English classes in Mongolian public schools. This case reflects a broader global trend in which educational systems adopt foreign-produced textbooks with limited localization. This situation underscores the pressing need to evaluate whether these materials adequately represent the cultural realities and identities of Mongolian learners.

However, despite the broad adoption of Pearson's materials, there is a notable gap in research regarding the cultural relevance of these materials, particularly in non-English-speaking contexts like Mongolia. While textbooks play a central role in supporting curriculum delivery (Richards, 2002), they must reflect students' cultural backgrounds to enhance engagement and learning outcomes (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This research aims to analyze the *Wider World* series, focusing on its visual elements to

assess how well these images align with Mongolian cultural values and experiences.

Pearson's curriculum was designed to meet international standards (Pearson Education, 2020), but its implementation in Mongolia raises questions about cultural adaptation. As Mongolia is a culturally diverse country with its own unique traditions, the potential misalignment between the curriculum's content and the local context could limit its effectiveness. Visual images, in particular, have been shown to convey cultural meanings that may either resonate with or alienate students based on their cultural backgrounds (Banks, 2007).

Thus, this study seeks to fill the gap in literature by conducting a visual analysis of the *Wider World* textbook's cultural alignment. Through this analysis, we aim to determine whether the visual elements of the textbook adequately represent Mongolian culture and how they compare with the culture of English-speaking countries (the target culture) and international cultures more broadly (Moran, 2001). This research will provide valuable insights for educators and textbook publishers, contributing to the improvement of English language teaching in Mongolia and promoting a more culturally balanced approach to global education.

1.1 Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it fills a gap in the literature by focusing on the visual representation of culture in ELT textbooks, particularly in the Mongolian context. The findings will provide insights into how textbooks reflect the diverse cultural backgrounds of Mongolian students and offer practical suggestions for improving the cultural relevance of ELT materials. This research will encourage educators and textbook publishers to consider the cultural dimensions of visual content in their teaching resources, ultimately ensuring that it enhances student engagement, promotes intercultural understanding, and supports more effective learning outcomes.

2. Literature Review

As the world becomes increasingly globalized, the ability to communicate effectively in English has become an essential skill for individuals across diverse cultures, professions, and industries (Ekshiekh et al., 2024). Within this global context, the integration of culture into English language education

has emerged as a central topic in contemporary ELT research, particularly as learners engage more frequently in intercultural communication across borders. Recent analyses of ELT textbooks confirm this growing emphasis, demonstrating that cultural content plays a crucial role in shaping learners' intercultural competence and global awareness (Sattarpour et al., 2024).

Current research highlights that language learning extends far beyond the acquisition of grammar and vocabulary; it involves understanding how language is embedded within cultural contexts, identities, values, and worldviews. As many educational systems adopt internationally published ELT textbooks, questions regarding cultural representation, cultural relevance, and inclusivity have become increasingly important. These concerns are especially significant in contexts like Mongolia, where English instruction relies heavily on foreign-produced materials that may not fully reflect local cultural realities or students' lived experiences.

Against this backdrop, this literature review examines three interconnected areas: the role of culture in English language teaching, the importance of culturally relevant materials for supporting learner engagement and identity, and the function of visual images in conveying cultural messages within textbooks. Together, these themes provide the theoretical foundation for analyzing the cultural content of Pearson's *Wider World* series used in 5th-grade English classes in Mongolia and for evaluating the extent to which its visual elements align with Mongolian learners' cultural contexts and educational needs.

2.1 The Role of Culture in English Language Teaching (ELT)

The integration of culture into ELT is essential for learners' development of communicative competence (Sudartini, 2021). According to Valenzuela and Munoz (2020), incorporating cultural elements into the language curriculum enhances learners' ability to navigate various cultural contexts. They argue that understanding culture not only enriches language learning but also promotes intercultural awareness. According to Moreno and Mancilla (2021) further posit that exposing students to cultural content strengthens critical thinking skills and deepens their understanding of cultural diversity.

However, integrating culture into ELT poses challenges. Garcia and Juste (2019) highlight the difficulties of selecting culturally appropriate materials that resonate with all learners, considering their diverse backgrounds. Despite these challenges, incorporating culture is seen as an

essential tool for motivating language learners. Sanchez and Galiana (2019) note that context-specific teaching methodologies adapted to local cultural settings result in more effective language learning experiences. This approach recognizes the significance of students' cultural identities and the value of teaching materials that reflect their cultural backgrounds (Romero & Rodriguez, 2021).

In the context of Mongolia, the shift toward teaching English as the primary foreign language since the 1990s has led to a growing emphasis on English-language curricula, including the adoption of Pearson's English program. Pearson is renowned for its global educational resources, used across 160 countries (Pearson, 2015). Pearson's curriculum aims to prepare students with global competencies, promoting intercultural understanding through its integration of international cultural content. However, the appropriateness of such global content for Mongolian students whose cultural and educational contexts differ significantly from those of English-speaking countries has been a topic of discussion (Daariimaa & Lee, 2023; Dovchin, 2015).

The integration of cultural relevance into ELT is vital for fostering deeper engagement with learning materials. Culturally relevant pedagogy an approach that recognizes and incorporates students' cultural backgrounds into the learning process enhances academic achievement by making the content more meaningful (Gay, 2018; Villegas & Lucas, 2021). Studies of textbooks used in Asia, however, often show that they fail to adequately represent the cultures of the learners, indicating a significant gap in the cultural relevance of educational materials (Cortazzi & Jin, 2013; Li & Gao, 2019; Zhang, 2021).

2.2 The Importance of Cultural Relevance in English Education

Cultural relevance plays a fundamental role in the effectiveness of English education, especially in contexts where English is taught as a foreign language. Modern English language teaching emphasizes not only linguistic competence but also the ability to use language meaningfully in culturally diverse contexts (Byram, 1997). In this view, English education is not solely about mastering vocabulary and grammar; it also involves developing learners' capacity to express their own cultural identity and understand others' perspectives.

Culturally relevant materials help students connect English learning to their everyday lives, improving motivation and engagement. According to Gay (2010), culturally responsive teaching recognizes the importance of including students' cultural backgrounds in all aspects of learning, which has been linked to increased academic success. When students see familiar cultural elements in English textbooks such as traditional clothing, local foods, or festivals they feel more included and confident in their learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

In English education, cultural relevance also prepares students to participate in global communication. English today functions as a global *lingua franca*, often used between non-native speakers (Jenkins, 2007). Therefore, English learners need the ability to discuss their own culture in English, not just absorb the cultures of English-speaking countries. Kramsch (1993) emphasizes that learners must develop symbolic competence the ability to express their identity in intercultural contexts. When textbooks lack representation of local culture, students are not given opportunities to develop this skill.

Furthermore, when English education overemphasizes certain cultural norms, it may unintentionally imply that other cultures are less important or irrelevant. A 2025 content-analysis study of Chinese university ELT textbooks found that cultural content remains unbalanced, with source and international cultures under-represented and deeper cultural perspectives often neglected an imbalance that can hinder learners' intercultural awareness and holistic understanding of culture (Zhu & Liu, 2025). For countries like Mongolia, where cultural pride and preservation are important, embedding source culture in English materials not only supports language learning but also reinforces national identity.

In summary, from an English education perspective, cultural relevance enhances learner motivation, identity development, and intercultural communicative competence. Including local culture in ELT textbooks supports students in becoming confident English users who can engage meaningfully in global and local communication.

2.3 Visual Representation and Cultural Relevance in ELT

The visual elements of textbooks play a pivotal role in conveying cultural messages, providing rich insights into cultural values and norms. Banks (2007) argues that visual images are valuable for research because they offer

accessible and impactful representations of cultural contexts that might not be captured through text alone. In the context of ELT, visual images such as illustrations, photographs, and diagrams serve as crucial tools for understanding cultural representations. Recent research shows that visual images in ELT textbooks play a significant role in enhancing learners' comprehension and engagement, particularly when the images reflect students' own cultural backgrounds (Ko, 2020; Liu & Qu, 2023).

This study draws on Moran's (2001) framework, which divides culture into five dimensions: cultural products (e.g., artifacts, institutions, art forms), practices (e.g., rituals, communicative acts), perspectives (e.g., values, beliefs, attitudes), communities (e.g., social groups, national cultures), and persons (individuals who embody cultural norms). These dimensions offer a comprehensive lens for analyzing visual images in ELT materials, helping to assess how well the images represent local, target, or international cultures. Chao's (2011) framework, which categorizes cultures as source, target, or international, further informs the analysis of how visual content in Pearson's ELT textbooks aligns with these cultural categories.

2.4 The Cultural Relevance of Pearson's English Curriculum in Mongolia

Pearson's English curriculum, particularly the "Wider World" series, has been adopted by the Mongolian Ministry of Education for use in public schools (Pearson Education, 2020). The curriculum is designed to meet global educational standards and aims to provide students with a comprehensive English language education. However, its application in Mongolia has raised questions about the cultural relevance of its content. Mongolia's diverse cultural heritage, including ethnic minorities such as the Kazakh population, requires textbooks that reflect both the local culture and global perspectives to ensure equity and inclusion.

Previous studies on the cultural relevance of ELT textbooks in the Mongolian context have shown a gap in the representation of Mongolian culture in foreign textbooks (Yen, 2000; Yi, 1997). Given the prominence of Pearson's curriculum in Mongolian public schools, it is essential to evaluate how well these textbooks incorporate cultural elements that are meaningful to Mongolian students. This evaluation is particularly important as the curriculum continues to expand across the country, from primary to secondary schools.

2.5 Theoretical Framework for Visual Cultural Analysis

The methodological approach of this study is grounded in visual semiotics and intercultural communicative competence theories, which inform how visual content can represent cultural meanings in educational materials. Visual images in textbooks are not neutral; they carry cultural codes, messages, and assumptions that reflect particular worldviews (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Semiotic analysis enables researchers to move beyond surface-level interpretation (denotation) and explore deeper, culturally embedded meanings (connotation) in textbook visuals (Isnaini et al., 2019; Sahraee, 2017; Rezeki & Sagala, 2021).

In particular, this study draws on Moran's (2001) five dimensions of culture products (e.g., artifacts, institutions, art forms), practices (e.g., rituals, communicative acts), perspectives (e.g., values, beliefs, attitudes), communities (e.g., social groups, national cultures), and persons (individuals embodying cultural norms) as a lens to understand how visuals reflect cultural content. These dimensions provide a comprehensive structure to identify what kinds of cultural elements are represented and how they connect to students' lived experiences. Complementing this, Chao's (2011) cultural categorization framework source culture (students' own), target culture (English-speaking countries), and international culture (neutral or global) helps to assess whether textbook visuals prioritize foreign or familiar content.

From an educational perspective, this study also aligns with Ladson-Billings' (1995) theory of culturally relevant pedagogy, which stresses the importance of including students' cultural backgrounds in curriculum design. By analyzing the visual elements of textbooks through these theoretical lenses, the study aims to reveal the extent to which Mongolian learners are culturally represented in their English education materials.

2.6 Research Objective

The objective of this study is to assess the cultural relevance of visual content in Pearson's English Language Teaching (ELT) textbooks used by Mongolian students. By analyzing the visual elements within these textbooks, the research aims to determine how well they reflect Mongolian culture, values, and societal norms. Additionally, the study seeks to explore how English-speaking and international cultures are represented and evaluate the role of these elements in fostering cultural understanding and student

engagement. In so doing, the study seeks to answer the following research questions.

2.7 Research Questions

1. How culturally relevant are the visual elements in Pearson's ELT textbooks for Mongolian students?
2. To what extent do the visual representations in Pearson's textbooks align with Mongolian culture, English-speaking cultures, and international cultures?
3. How do the visual elements in the textbooks contribute to cultural understanding and engagement among Mongolian students?

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative approach to evaluate the cultural relevance of visual elements in Pearson's Primary English Language Teaching (ELT) textbooks, specifically the *Wider World* series used in Mongolia. A visual analysis method was chosen as it allows for a detailed examination of how cultural elements are represented through images, illustrations, and other visual content in the textbooks. Visual elements play a crucial role in conveying cultural messages and providing insights into cultural values and norms, often carrying implicit meanings that might not be immediately evident through textual analysis alone. The focus on visual content aligns with the aim of understanding how textbooks communicate culture to students and how they resonate with their own cultural contexts.

3.2 Data Collection

The primary data for this study consists of visual images extracted from the *Wider World* second edition, Special Edition for Mongolia, designed for 5th-grade students. The textbook contains 158 pages, divided into nine units, and includes various types of visual content such as photographs, drawings, diagrams, and maps. These visual elements are analyzed to assess their cultural alignment with Mongolian, English-speaking, and international cultures. By focusing on the images in the textbook, this study investigates how these visuals represent or fail to represent Mongolian culture, while also considering their portrayal of English-speaking and international cultures.

3.3 Visual Analysis Framework

The visual analysis is guided by two key analytical dimensions: denotation and connotation. Denotation refers to the literal content of the image what is visible without deeper interpretation while connotation explores the cultural implications or meanings embedded in the image. The analysis is based on a 5-point scale for each criterion to evaluate how effectively the images represent cultural aspects:

Denotation:

- 1: No visible cultural markers related to any culture
- 2: Minimal cultural markers, not easily identifiable
- 3: Some cultural markers, but subtle or general
- 4: Clear cultural markers associated with a specific culture
- 5: Strong, easily identifiable cultural markers clearly associated with a culture

Connotation:

- 1: No meaningful cultural implication
- 2: Minimal cultural meaning, implications are weak
- 3: Some cultural meaning, though not strongly conveyed
- 4: Clear cultural meaning with some deeper implications
- 5: Rich, strong cultural meaning, conveying specific values, practices, or beliefs

Cultural Alignment Categories

Each image is categorized based on its cultural alignment, using the following categories:

Source culture (SC): Mongolian culture

Target culture (TC): English-speaking countries (e.g., UK, USA)

International culture (IC): Cultures found in countries other than Mongolia or English-speaking countries

These categories allow for a comparative analysis of how well the visual elements of the textbook represent the cultures of the students in the Mongolian context, as well as English-speaking and international cultures.

3.4 Data Analysis

The data analysis for this study focuses on how cultural elements are represented in the visual component of the *Wider World* Second Edition, Special Edition for Mongolia, used in 5th-grade English classes in Mongolia.

The analysis was conducted on all visual images within the textbook, with each image assessed for its denotation, connotation, and cultural alignment. A qualitative content analysis approach is used to examine the images. Each visual element is analyzed at two levels: (1) denotation, which refers to the literal content of the image (what is visibly shown), and (2) connotation, which refers to the cultural meanings, values, or assumptions implied by the image. This dual approach is commonly used in multimodal and visual semiotic analysis.

After identifying denotative and connotative meanings, each image is coded according to its cultural alignment: (a) source culture (Mongolian cultural elements), (b) target culture (English-speaking cultures such as the UK or US), and (c) international culture (global or culturally neutral elements). These categories were created specifically for this study to reflect Mongolian learners' educational context and the cultural aims of the textbook.

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To ensure reliability, a second rater independently analyzes a random sample (approximately 20–30%) of the images using the same coding scheme. The results are compared to identify any inconsistencies, and disagreements are discussed until consensus is reached. This intercoder agreement process enhances the dependability of the findings and reduces subjectivity.

Once all images are coded, the data are summarized to identify patterns in cultural representation across units. Both the frequency of cultural categories and qualitative descriptions of visual themes are used to interpret how Mongolian, English-speaking, and international cultures are presented. These findings are then connected to the research questions to assess the cultural relevance of the textbook for Mongolian students.

4. Results

This section presents the findings from the visual analysis of the *Wider World Second Edition: Special Edition for Mongolia*, used in 5th-grade English classes in Mongolia.

The textbook contains 158 pages, including nine instructional units (Units 0–8), followed by sections such as Grammar Time, Student Activities, Word List, and a supplementary Mongolian culture section. For the purpose of this analysis, only the visuals from the nine main units were included. A total of 348 images and illustrations were identified and analyzed.

Table 1 provides an overview of the dominant cultural alignment identified in each unit. This summary highlights the recurring patterns of target culture (TC) representation and the limited presence of Source Culture elements throughout Units zero to eight.

Unit	Topic	Dominant Cultural Alignment	Notes
Unit 0	Get Started <i>(alphabet, numbers, colors, classroom objects)</i>	International	Visuals are mostly generic educational images, lacking identifiable cultural markers. No Mongolian context is present.
Unit 1	Family and Friends	Target / International	Illustrations and photos depict families from Western cultures. No representation of Mongolian family structures or clothing.
Unit 2	My Things <i>(clothes, shapes)</i>	Target	Clothing styles shown reflect Western fashion. No local clothing styles or references to Mongolian traditional dress.
Unit 3	In the House	Target	Houses and rooms resemble Western architecture and furniture. No imagery of traditional Mongolian homes (e.g., ger).
Unit 4	About Me <i>(body parts)</i>	International	Neutral illustrations of human figures, suitable for universal use. No cultural markers visible.
Unit 5	Things I Can Do <i>(school clubs, musical instruments)</i>	Target	School activities, clubs, and musical instruments are Western (e.g., guitar, violin, drama club). Lacks local instruments like morin khuur.
Unit 6	My Day <i>(daily routine)</i>	Target	Images show Western daily life (e.g., Western breakfast, commuting style). No depiction of Mongolian school or home life.

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Unit 7	Animals	International	Mostly neutral and globally recognized animals. Slightly more culturally neutral compared to previous units.
Unit 8	I Like That (sports)	Target	Focuses on sports popular in the West (e.g., basketball, tennis). No mention of traditional Mongolian sports like wrestling or horse racing.

Table 1*Dominant Cultural Alignment by Unit and Key Observation*

The visual content analysis of Units 0 to 8 in *Wider World: Special Edition for Mongolia* reveals a predominant emphasis on target culture (Western) elements, with limited inclusion of international culture and a noticeable absence of source (Mongolian) culture within the core visual materials.

Unit zero introducing basic concepts like the alphabet and classroom objects, is largely culturally neutral and classified as international. However, beginning with Unit one, which focuses on family and friends, Western cultural imagery becomes dominant illustrations show Western family structures and attire, missing the opportunity to reflect Mongolian customs. Similarly, Units two and three continue this trend, with Western clothing and housing styles represented throughout.

Units five, six, and eight are also highly target culture-oriented, depicting Western school clubs, musical instruments, daily routines, and popular sports. These units offer no visual cues relevant to Mongolian students' lived experiences, such as traditional instruments or sports rooted in local culture.

Units four and seven are more culturally neutral and international in nature, especially in their visual presentation of body parts and animals. However, even in these units, there is a lack of cultural specificity related to Mongolia.

Notably, no units include explicit source culture elements within the main textbook visuals. While occasional Mongolian references may appear in supplementary student activities or teacher-added content, these are sparse and not systematically integrated into the curriculum.

This consistent cultural bias toward the target culture highlights the urgent need for localized visual and contextual content. Incorporating Mongolian cultural references would enhance learner engagement, foster cultural identity, and ensure the materials are more relevant and meaningful to Mongolian students.

Table 2 presents the number of visuals per unit and the average denotation and connotation scores and a broad overview of cultural alignment in the textbook. To calculate the percentages of Target Culture (TC), International Culture (IC), and Source Culture (SC), each visual in the textbook was manually categorized according to Chao's (2011) cultural framework:

- Target Culture (TC): Images representing English-speaking countries or Western contexts, including objects, settings, clothing, lifestyles, and cultural practices specific to these cultures.
- International Culture (IC): Images that are globally recognizable or culturally neutral, such as animals, classroom objects, or generic backgrounds.
- Source Culture (SC): Images reflecting Mongolian culture, local environments, traditions, clothing, or daily life.

Each image was assigned to one category based on its content, and the percentages for each category were calculated by dividing the number of visuals in that category by the total number of visuals in the unit. This method allowed for a clear and consistent assessment of how the textbook represents different cultures.

Table 2

Integrated Visual Analysis: Denotation, Connotation, and Cultural Alignment Across Units 0-8

Unit	No. visuals	Avg. Denotation	Avg. Connotation	Target Culture	International Culture	Source Culture
Unit 0	20	3.5	3.6	65.0%	35.0%	0.0%
Unit 1	48	4.27	4.25	60.4%	39.6%	0.0%
Unit 2	35	3.94	4.03	60.0%	40.0%	0.0%
Unit 3	33	4.12	4.21	93.9%	6.1%	0.0%
Unit 4	36	3.75	3.81	77.8%	22.2%	0.0%
Unit 5	38	3.58	3.84	88.9%	16.7%	0.0%
Unit 6	39	3.49	3.9	87.2%	12.8%	0.0%
Unit 7	45	3.78	3.91	64.4%	35.6%	0.0%
Unit 8	54	3.74	3.89	96.3%	3.7%	0.0%
Total	348	3.84	3.98	77.8%	22.8%	0.0%

The table above summarizes the visual analysis results from Units zero to eight of the *Wider World Special Edition for Mongolia*, used in 5th-grade English classes in Mongolia. The columns for average denotation and average connotation indicate the general complexity and cultural depth of the visuals.

- Denotation was measured based on the clarity, specificity, and amount of literal information presented in each image. Images depicting multiple objects, actions, or settings were assigned higher scores, while simpler visuals received lower scores.
- Connotation was measured based on the richness of implied cultural meanings, including the presence of cultural cues, social practices, lifestyle indicators, and symbolic content. Images conveying more nuanced or detailed cultural messages received higher scores.

Each image was scored from 1 (low) to 5 (high), and the average scores per unit were calculated by dividing the sum of the scores by the number of

visuals in that unit. The resulting averages, ranging from approximately 3.5 to 4.2, suggest that most visuals are moderately detailed in both their literal content and cultural associations that is, they are relatively straightforward but include some cultural cues.

In terms of cultural alignment, the data shows a strong dominance of target culture visuals, which make up the majority across nearly all units. For example, Units three, five, six, and eight have very high percentages of target culture representation (over 85%), with Unit eight reaching 96.3%. In contrast, international culture visuals appear more frequently in Units zero, one, two, and seven, where the content is more neutral (e.g., basic vocabulary or animals), but still range only between 22% and 40%. Most notably, source culture (Mongolian) visuals are completely absent (0.0%) in all core units.

Example of Visual Analysis: Unit 3 “In the House” (Page 54)

The following figure presents one of the selected images along with an explanation of how the denotation, connotation, and cultural alignment scores were assigned. This example demonstrates the process of visual analysis applied throughout the textbook and provides a clear rationale for the scoring decisions.

This figure was selected because it represents one of the visuals with the highest denotative and connotative scores in the dataset. The image includes a variety of household items and interior settings, offering rich cultural cues and detailed visual information. Therefore, it serves as an appropriate example of high-level denotation, connotation, and cultural alignment in textbook visuals.

Figure 1

High Denotation and Connotation Image (Unit 3: In The House)



Denotation (Literal Meaning)

The image displays six different types of houses found in the UK, each labeled clearly: a detached house, terraced houses, semi-detached houses, a cottage, a houseboat, and a block of flats. The photographs highlight architectural styles, building materials, and surrounding environments. At the literal level, the visuals introduce housing vocabulary and provide real examples of British architectural types.

Connotation (Implied Cultural Meaning)

The images carry several cultural implications:

- Cultural authenticity: Each house type reflects distinct British architectural traditions and modern housing structures.
- Lifestyle and social class: Detached houses and cottages suggest middle-class or rural lifestyles, while terraced houses and flats imply urban living.
- Cultural diversity of living spaces: The houseboat represents an alternative lifestyle, signaling openness to nontraditional living arrangements.
- Western values: The visuals emphasize privacy, individuality, and tidy surroundings.

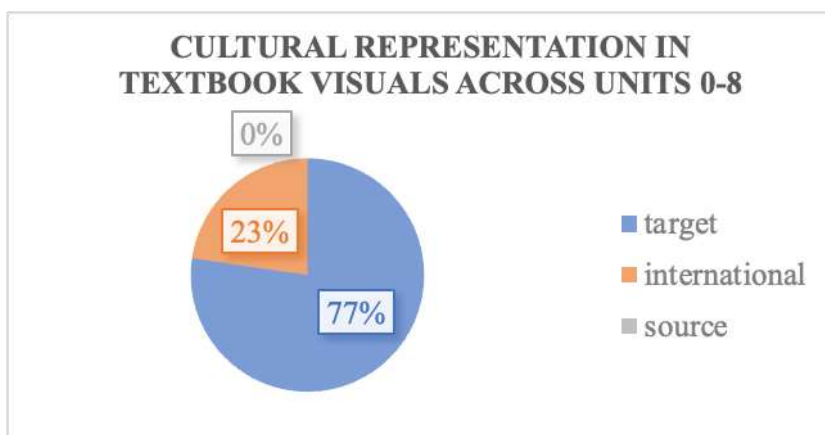
Cultural Alignment

- Target Culture: This image clearly represents target culture (English-speaking countries), as it depicts typical British housing styles and associated cultural practices.
- Source Culture: Not represented (does not reflect Mongolian culture).
- International Culture: Some aspects (e.g., general urban vs. rural housing distinctions) may be considered universal, but the primary focus is on target culture.

Semiotic Scores

- Denotation Score: 5 / 5 – Highly clear, specific, and culturally rich.
- Connotation Score: 5 / 5 – Strong cultural messages related to lifestyle, class, and environment.
- Cultural Alignment Score: Target Culture – Clear representation of the intended English-speaking context.

Visual Data Representation

Figure 2*Cultural Representation in Textbook Visuals Across Units 0-8*

The pie chart illustrates the overall distribution of cultural alignment within the visuals from Units zero to eight of the textbook. The quantitative analysis shows a clear predominance of target culture (TC) representation, which accounts for 77% of all images. These visuals primarily depict Western or English-speaking cultural contexts such as British houses, Western classrooms, and individuals with Western appearances consistent with the typical orientation of global ELT materials.

International culture (IC) represents 23% of the visuals. These images include culturally neutral or globally recognizable items (e.g., school supplies, general landscapes, simple objects) that do not convey specific cultural identities. While these visuals are accessible to learners from diverse backgrounds, they do not contribute strongly to cultural connection or identity reinforcement.

Most notably, source culture (SC) representation stands at 0%, indicating a complete absence of Mongolian cultural elements in the main instructional units. No visuals depict Mongolian people, traditional settings, local daily life, or culturally relevant environments. This is a significant finding, especially given that the textbook is labeled as a “Special Edition for Mongolia.”

The imbalance suggests that students are mainly exposed to foreign cultural contexts while receiving minimal visual input related to their own culture. For Mongolian learners, this may reduce both cultural relevance and emotional engagement, as the materials do not reflect their lived experiences. The results highlight the need for more inclusive textbook design that incorporates source culture imagery alongside target and international cultural elements.

The overall distribution shown in Figure 2 provides a broad overview of cultural alignment in the textbook. To understand this pattern more precisely, the next table breaks down the representation of source, target, and international culture by individual units, offering a more detailed view of how cultural elements vary throughout the textbook.

5. Discussion

The visual content analysis of the *Wider World Special Edition for Mongolia* highlights a clear cultural imbalance, with visuals overwhelmingly favoring the target (Western) culture while largely excluding Mongolian (source) cultural elements. Despite being marketed as a localized edition, the textbook's core units do not visually represent the learners' cultural background, which undermines the potential benefits of contextualized language learning.

While Mongolian cultural references appear in isolated supplementary sections, they are not woven into the main instructional flow, rendering them peripheral rather than integral. This marginalization reflects what Cortazzi and Jin (1999) call the 'hidden curriculum', where dominant cultural norms here, Western are presented as the default, while local cultures are optional or secondary. This creates a practical challenge in classrooms, where teachers are compelled to localize foreign material without institutional support or training. As noted by Daariimaa and Lee (2023), Mongolian teachers have expressed difficulty supplementing culturally distant material while meeting curriculum goals. As a result, students may struggle to connect with the material, which can affect motivation and identity formation.

When learners do not see their own cultural practices or environments reflected in educational content, they may perceive their own cultural identity as inferior or irrelevant contributing to a form of symbolic exclusion (Kramsch, 1993). These findings affirm the theoretical foundation laid by culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), which asserts that learning improves when students see their identities and communities reflected in the curriculum.

A more balanced representation of source, target, and international cultures would not only enhance learner engagement but also foster cultural pride. In this sense, the textbook's over-reliance on target cultural imagery fails to promote intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997), as students are not given the opportunity to express or reflect upon their own culture in English, a key skill in global communication.

Localization must go beyond surface-level tokenism such as placing a Mongolian reference in a supplementary activity or a cover page and instead prioritize deep integration of students' cultural contexts into each unit. Moran's (2001) five dimensions of culture which are products, practices, perspectives, communities, and persons provide a robust framework for such integration. Moreover, the visual dominance of Western cultural practices (e.g., food, housing, fashion, and sports) normalizes specific lifestyles and reinforces a hidden message that "real" English speakers come from English-speaking countries reproducing what Gray (2010) critiques as the global consumerist agenda embedded in ELT publishing.

This also limits learners' development of symbolic competence (Kramsch, 1993), a critical component of intercultural communication that empowers students to negotiate meaning across cultural boundaries. From a policy and design standpoint, these findings call for a redefinition of what constitutes a "localized edition." A genuine localized textbook must be developed with the active participation of local educators and cultural experts, ensuring that not only textual but also visual content supports learners' identities.

6. Conclusion

This study analyzed the cultural relevance of visual content in the *Wider World Second Edition: Special Edition for Mongolia*, focusing on Units zero to eight. The findings reveal a significant imbalance in cultural representation: visuals predominantly reflect target and international cultures, while Mongolian (source) cultural elements are largely absent from the main instructional units. Although some localized content appears in supplementary materials, its limited and inconsistent integration suggests that the textbook does not fully reflect the cultural realities of Mongolian learners. This disconnect may hinder student engagement and place additional burdens on teachers to provide culturally relevant content without institutional support (Daariimaa & Lee, 2023; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

To address this issue, it is recommended that textbook developers integrate Mongolian cultural content such as traditional clothing, local environments, festivals, and daily life directly into the core units of ELT materials. Ensuring a more balanced representation of source, target, and international cultures can help students see their identities reflected in the curriculum, thereby enhancing motivation, engagement, and cultural pride (Gay, 2010; Romero & Gonzalez, 2021). Collaborative efforts with local educators, illustrators, and curriculum developers are essential to ensure cultural appropriateness and resonance. Developing a standardized framework for textbook adaptation based on models such as Moran's (2001) five dimensions of culture may also support culturally inclusive curriculum design. When full integration is not feasible, supplementary materials that are visually and contextually aligned with local culture should be provided to enhance learning.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. It focused exclusively on visual elements and did not examine other components such as written texts, listening materials, or classroom discourse. The scope was also restricted to a single grade level (Grade 5), limiting generalizability across other educational stages. Furthermore, although the denotation, connotation framework was used, interpretation of visual meaning may still involve subjective judgment. Finally, this study did not directly assess the pedagogical effects of cultural representation. Future research should explore how culturally relevant visuals influence student

motivation, identity development, and intercultural competence through classroom-based studies or learner interviews.

Overall, these findings underscore the need to treat cultural representation as a central principle in ELT textbook design. Embedding local culture meaningfully and consistently in teaching materials is essential for supporting inclusive, responsive, and effective English language education.

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