Exploring Business Cultural Elements in A College-Level English Textbook

De Nguyen[1], Long Thanh Nguyen[2]

[1]Ho Chi Minh City University of Economics and Finance, Vietnam
[2]Nguyen Tat Thanh University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

ABSTRACT: English textbooks are regarded as the "tangible heart" of any ELT program, so effective communication may require learners to develop intercultural understanding. This study aims to explore the way cultural elements are represented through different aspects in the textbook *Business Plus 1* (Helliwell, 2014). A detailed analysis of the cultural content was conducted based on the theoretical framework of Cortazzi & Jin (1999), while also being examined through Kachru's (1992) model. The findings indicate that international culture appears most frequently - particularly Asian culture - followed by target culture, and least of all, learners' source culture. Furthermore, countries in the Expanding Circle dominate the textbook, conveying the message that local culture is not given primacy, unlike the tradition of many foreign language teaching (FLT) materials.

KEYWORDS: Cultural element, English textbook, English language teaching, Intercultural communicative competence.

1. INTRODUCTION

Today, English is considered a lingua franca, a common language used for communication, especially in the fields of business and commerce, and systematically employed to connect communities that do not share the same mother tongue. At the same time, when discussing the role of English as a tool for fostering intercultural communicative competence, Brdarić (2016) affirms that language and culture are inseparable; language must be nurtured by culture, while culture should be integrated into English teaching for English to function as a mediating language.

Culture has long been an essential and indispensable element in FLT. Because language and culture are closely intertwined, cultural aspects can hardly be ignored in language instruction. Most publications and textbooks reflect the culture of the language in which they are written. In other words, they are heavily imbued with cultural elements. EFL textbooks are designed to develop language proficiency and communicative competence for second language learners, while also profoundly influencing learners' perceptions and attitudes toward the community, others, and themselves. Therefore, it is necessary to ensure that textbooks reflect cultural diversity to nurture learners' ability to perceive and appreciate differences. Moreover, they play a role in raising cultural awareness, encouraging global citizenship, and are regarded as both a medium and a product of culture (Teo & Kaewsakul, 2016).

In summary, in today's era of globalisation, as the world becomes increasingly "flat" and distances are blurred, learning English requires learners not only to master linguistic skills but also to value cultural diversity - an essential factor for education in multicultural environments and for promoting intercultural connections. Teaching culture should thus be considered an integral part of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, since one of the primary goals of FLT is to develop intercultural communicative competence.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Globalisation of English

English is a global language, present in almost all major domains, including business, communication, education, science, and technology. History shows that the dominance of English originated from the process of colonization and was later reinforced by the powerful rise of the United States after World War II, as it became the world's leading economic superpower. As a result of this development, Kachru (1992) introduced the "Three Circles Model of World Englishes."

The inner circle constitutes the core of English, comprising countries where the language is spoken as a mother tongue. Nations such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and Ireland fall into this category. In these contexts, English is naturally acquired as a first language and functions as the official medium in public life.

The outer circle consists of countries that were historically shaped by colonization from inner-circle nations. Examples include India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and South Africa. In these societies, English does not serve as a native language but has developed into an important lingua franca, largely as a result of the British Empire's expansion.

The expanding circle refers to regions where English is primarily employed for international communication and diplomacy, and where it is taught as a foreign language in schools and universities. In such places, English holds no official status, yet it plays a crucial role in cross-border interaction. Countries like Japan, Thailand, China, Germany, France, and Russia are typically classified within this circle.

According to Kachru's (1992) model, Vietnam can be classified within the expanding circle, where English is taught as a foreign language.

2.2 Intercultural Communicative Competence

According to Byram (1997, 2021), intercultural communicative competence is a complex concept, understood as the ability to achieve mutual understanding through sharing and interaction among individuals with diverse social identities and personal characteristics. In other words, it is the ability to understand and communicate effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds. The components of this competence encompass knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values tied to one's social identity. Byram (1997, 2021) argues that an "intercultural speaker" is someone open-minded, who accepts differences, and is eager to learn about the values and beliefs of others. Moreover, a successful "international speaker" can view themselves from the perspective of others

2.3 Culture in English Language Textbooks

In the current educational context, EFL classrooms are considered the primary channel through which learners access cultural information, as they have limited opportunities to experience authentic cultural environments. Textbooks, in particular, are regarded as an essential source of cultural knowledge and serve as fundamental tools to promote both language learning and cultural acquisition. In fact, EFL textbooks are often referred to as the "tangible heart" of the entire English language curriculum. Specifically, Cortazzi and Jin (1999) argue that textbooks can simultaneously play the roles of teacher, guide, resource, trainer, authority, and ideology. Within EFL teaching, they are expected to offer multiple cultural perspectives and voices, helping learners better understand diverse viewpoints and ideological values (Shin et al., 2011).

In recent years, numerous studies have investigated the representation of cultural content in EFL textbooks. A variety of approaches have been adopted, ranging from qualitative to mixed-methods and semiotic analysis. Cortazzi and Jin (1999) suggest that cultural elements in EFL textbooks are often categorized into three groups: learners' local culture, the target culture of native English-speaking countries, and international culture, which reflects diversity from across the globe.

Some scholars have noted that ELT textbooks often exhibit cultural bias by emphasizing the norms of the target language, thereby influencing learners' perceptions of themselves and others. For example, Yuen's (2011) study in Hong Kong found that American culture dominated ELT textbooks, while African culture was excluded. In Thailand, Thumvichit (2018) also found that although teachers emphasized the importance of intercultural content, English textbooks primarily focused on English-speaking countries and rarely mentioned Thai culture.

However, other studies have revealed a more diverse trend in cultural representation. Che and Fatah (2024) found that English textbooks published in China placed strong emphasis on local culture, while also incorporating target and international cultures; students generally expressed positive attitudes, particularly toward local culture. Similarly, Zhang and Nordin (2025) noted that the textbooks currently used in China primarily focus on international and source cultures, while the culture of native English speakers is not central. Based on these findings, the authors proposed a more balanced integration of cultural elements to enhance learners' understanding and encourage their active engagement.

Regarding varieties of English, Matsuda (2018) noted that EFL textbooks primarily focus on standard varieties from the Inner Circle according to Kachru's (1992) Three Circles Model, while the Outer and Expanding Circles receive little attention. Follow-up studies, such as those by Syrbe & Rose (2018) and Tajeddin & Pakzadian (2020), confirmed that British English and other Inner Circle varieties are often regarded as the standard, overshadowing non-native English speakers. In Sweden, Lejonord (2022) found that EFL textbooks almost entirely excluded the Outer Circle, thereby elevating the Inner Circle as the dominant authority and highlighting the need for a more critical and inclusive approach to textbook content. Meanwhile, Wakhidah & Adityarini (2021) emphasized the importance of balancing English varieties in Indonesian textbooks, where all three circles are represented.

To date, no research has analyzed cultural elements in the textbook *Business Plus 1*, which is currently used in colleges in Vietnam. Therefore, the present study aims to examine which types of culture are represented and to determine whether the textbook meets the cultural and educational needs of Vietnamese EFL college students. From this, the study seeks to propose implications for enhancing learners' intercultural awareness.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What types of cultural elements are represented in the *Business Plus 1* textbook, and which one is more prominent?

4. METHODOLOGY

This study employed content analysis to examine how cultural elements are represented in the *Business Plus 1* textbook. The research was conducted using *Business Plus 1*, first published by Cambridge University Press in 2014 and subsequently reprinted several times. This textbook is currently used for English instruction at the college level in Vietnam. The analysis focused on reading passages, audio recordings, and tasks related to culture, while exercises primarily concerned with vocabulary and grammar, with little cultural relevance, were excluded.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Frequency of Cultural Categories

The contents of the textbook, specifically from Unit 1 to Unit 10, were analysed, and the frequency of source culture, target culture, and international culture was recorded by section. Detailed results are presented in Appendix A, while the overall frequency distribution across the textbook is illustrated in Figure 1.
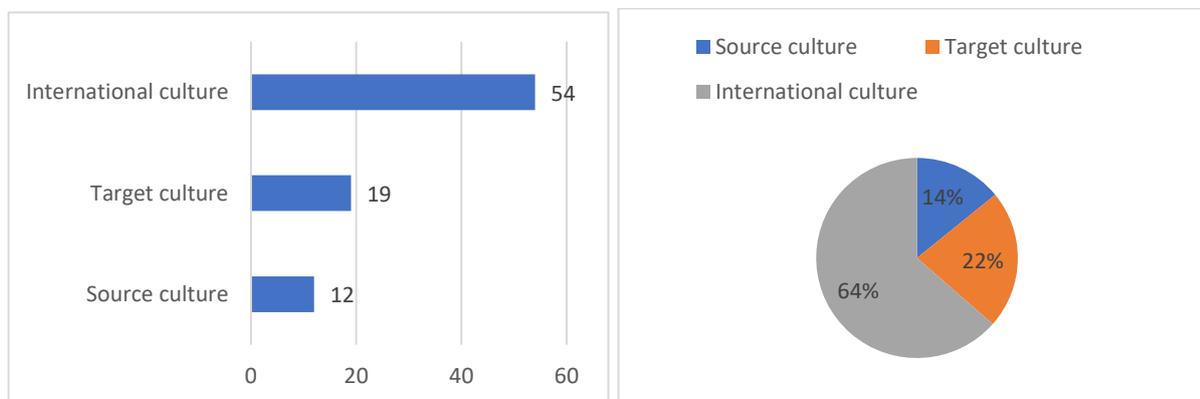

Figure 1: Frequency of Cultural Categories

The data from Figure 1 indicate that international culture accounts for the most significant proportion (64%), while source culture is limited (14%), and target culture is moderate (22%). Unlike previous studies that often emphasised the target culture (Thumvichit, 2018; James & Aziz, 2020; Karakuş, 2021), this study reveals that international culture holds a dominant position, accounting for more than half of the cultural elements in the textbook. This reflects a new orientation in FLT - guiding learners toward a multicultural language learning experience. In this approach, learners are encouraged to develop not only language skills but also the ability to understand and interpret diverse cultures (Kilickaya, 2004).

The analysis also reveals that *Business Plus 1* has made an effort to construct more diverse content by focusing on international cultures. Nevertheless, the source culture remains underrepresented, making up only 14%. The version used in Vietnam was written by foreign authors and designed for the Asian region; therefore, content related to Vietnam is rarely featured, while countries such as Thailand, Japan, China,… are more frequently represented. In short, the textbook reflects the global orientation of its authors from Cambridge University Press, rather than focusing on the target culture as traditional EFL textbooks have often done, or on local culture as textbooks written in Vietnam tend to emphasise.

5.2 Frequency of the Three Circles

The next stage of analysis focused on identifying nouns related to countries, regions, or continents in the textbook. These countries were categorised according to Kachru's (1992) Three Circles model: Inner Circle, Outer Circle, and Expanding Circle. The frequency of occurrence of each country across pages from Units 1–10 is presented in Appendix B, while the overall results according to the Three Circles model are illustrated in Figure 2.
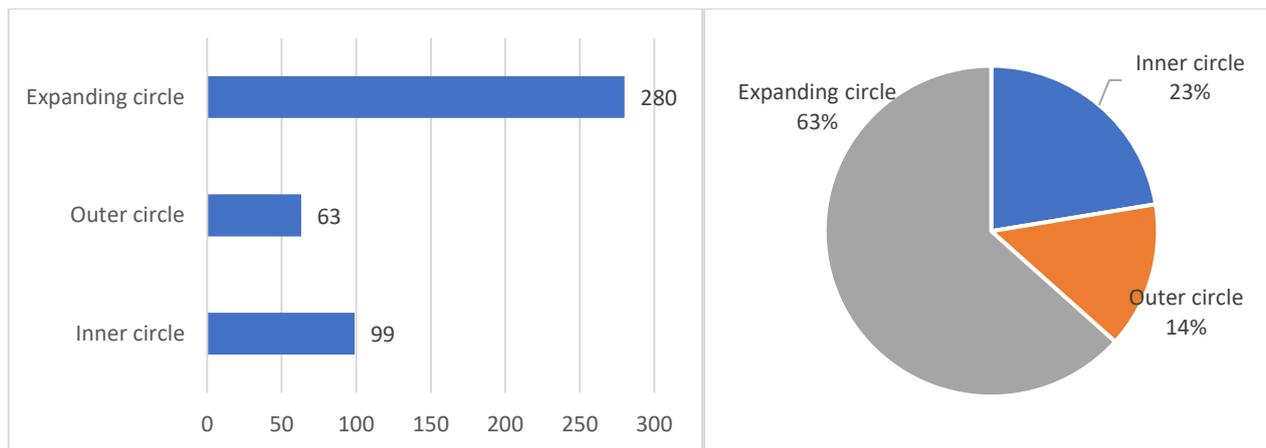

Figure 2: Frequency of the Three Circles

Figure 2 illustrates that cultural elements from the Expanding Circle account for the most significant proportion (63%) of the textbook's overall cultural content. Notably, the Inner Circle comprises 23%, representing the countries considered the target culture. This 23% can be regarded as relatively balanced when compared with the findings of Syrbe & Rose (2018) and Tajeddin & Pakzadian (2020), where the Inner Circle overwhelmingly dominated, while cultures from the Outer Circle were either excluded or portrayed with bias.

In addition, the textbook refers to a total of 38 countries, including Vietnam, six Inner Circle countries, nine European countries, two Central Asian countries, two African countries, three South American countries, and fifteen Asian countries. This demonstrates that *Business Plus 1* provides learners with a diverse range of cultural information from across five continents.

According to Table 1, within the Inner Circle cultures, the United Kingdom is most dominant at 48%, followed by Australia and the United States, each at 22%. Canada accounts for 5%, Ireland 4%, while New Zealand is represented the least, at only 1%.

Table 1: Categories of inner circle countries

Inner circle countries	Frequency	Percentage (%)
UK	47	48
Australia	22	22
USA	20	22
Canada	5	5
Ireland	4	4
New Zealand	1	1

According to Figure 3, Thailand is the most frequently mentioned country (58 times), followed by China (55 times), along with other countries such as the United Kingdom, Japan, Indonesia, the United States, France, South Korea, and Vietnam. The results indicate that the textbook places considerable emphasis on international culture, particularly in Asian countries. Notably, the inclusion of Vietnam in the top 10 suggests that the authors intended to address the needs of the Asian region, including Vietnam.

Figure 3: Ten most frequently mentioned countries in the textbook

5.3 Vocabulary Frequency in the Textbook

The analysis of vocabulary frequency in the *Business Plus 1* textbook, using NVivo 11 software, is presented in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Word Frequency Analysis from the Textbook

The word cloud in Figure 4 illustrates the frequency of words appearing in the textbook. Notably, the key terms highlighted are related to the workplace, such as *work, office, company, partner, business,* and *people,* indicating that the textbook's primary focus is on the business environment and professional relationships. This clearly reflects the cultural orientation of the textbook, which centres on workplace and business contexts. In addition, the presence of *China* and *Thailand* suggests that the textbook does not solely focus on target cultures (such as the UK and the US) but pays considerable attention to countries outside the Inner Circle, particularly Asian nations. This reflects the shift in globalisation trends in business.

In summary, the analysis reveals that international culture accounts for the largest share in *Business Plus 1* (63%), with a significant portion derived from Asian contexts - settings that are familiar and relevant to Vietnam. This reflects a multicultural orientation consistent with the concept of Business English as a Lingua Franca, which emphasises interactions between native and non-native speakers in the global business environment (Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2011). In contrast to many traditional ELT textbooks that focus primarily on native-speaker cultures (Rose & Galloway, 2019), *Business Plus 1* covers 38 countries across five continents, representing all three of Kachru's (1992) circles of English, with the Expanding Circle being dominant (63%) and the Inner Circle accounting for only 23%. This approach reduces the dominance of native-speaker norms and moves toward cultural balance (Pullin, 2015; Syrbe & Rose, 2018).

Nevertheless, the source culture - Vietnam (14%) - remains underrepresented. This highlights the need to integrate more Vietnamese cultural content into lessons to make them more relevant and meaningful to learners, while also providing greater learning motivation (Canagarajah, 2013). Furthermore, the word cloud in Figure 4 demonstrates that the textbook's themes revolve around work, business, and international communication, contributing to the development of intercultural awareness and clearly reflecting the role of English as a lingua franca in business (Baker, 2020).

6. CONCLUSION

The study examined how culture is integrated into an EFL textbook in the context of English as the global language of business. The findings reveal that international culture is dominant, target culture is moderately represented, while source culture remains limited. The textbook reflects diversity across all three of Kachru's (1992) cultural circles; although not entirely balanced, it contributes to fostering learners' multicultural awareness and aligns with the orientation of English as a lingua franca in business.

REFERENCES

1. Baker, W. (2020). English as a Lingua Franca and Transcultural Communication: Rethinking Competences and Pedagogy for ELT. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108685153.013
2. Brdarić, H. (2016). *The importance of teaching culture in the foreign language classroom* (Doctoral dissertation, Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek. Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. Department of English Language and Literature).
3. Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Multilingual Matters.
4. Byram, M. (2021). *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence: Revisited* (2nd ed). Bristol, Blue Ridge Summit: Multilingual Matters. https://doi.org/10.21832/9781800410251
5. Canagarajah, A. S. (2013). Translingual practice: Global Englishes and cosmopolitan relations. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
6. Che, H., & Fatah, F. A. (2024). Cultural content in high school English textbooks in China: Analysis of types, themes, and students' attitudes. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, *14*(8), 392-404.
7. Cortazzi, M., & Jin, L. (1999). Cultural mirrors: Materials and methods in the EFL classroom. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Culture in Second Language Teaching and Learning* (pp. 196–219). Cambridge University Press.
8. Helliwell, M. (2014). *Business Plus 1: Student's Book*. Cambridge University Press.
9. Hinkel, E. (Ed.). (1999). *Culture in second language teaching and learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
10. Kachru, B. B. (1992). Teaching World Englishes. In: B. B. Kachru (Ed.), *The Other Tongue: English Across Cultures* (pp. 355–366). University of Illinois Press.
11. Karakuş, E. (2021). A systematic review of the representation of cultural elements in English as a foreign language textbooks. *Language Teaching and Educational Research*, *4*(1), 13–29.
12. Kilickaya, F. (2004). Guidelines to Evaluate Cultural Content in Textbooks. *The Internet TESL Journal, 10*(12), 1–5.
13. Louhiala-Salminen, L, & Kankaanranta, A. (2011). Professional communication in a global business context: The notion of global communicative competence. *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication, Special issue on Professional Communication in Global Contexts, 54*, 244-262.
14. Pullin, Patricia (2015). Culture, curriculum design, syllabus and course development in the light of BELF. *Journal of English as a Lingua Franca*, *4*(1), 31-53.

15. Rose, H., & Galloway, N. (2019). *Global Englishes for language teaching*. Cambridge University Press.
16. Shin, Jeeyoung, Eslami, Zohreh R., & Chen, Wen-Chun (2011). Presentation of local and international culture in current international English-language teaching textbooks. *Language, Culture, and Curriculum*, *24*(3), 253-268.
17. Syrbe, M. & Rose, H. (2018). An evaluation of the global orientation of English textbooks in Germany. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching, 12*(2), 152–163. DOI: 10.1080/17501229.2015.1120736
18. Tajeddin, Z., & Pakzadian, M. (2020). Representation of inner, outer and expanding circle varieties and cultures in global ELT textbooks. *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education*, *5*(1), 10.
19. Teo, A., & Kaewsakul, W. (2016). Cultural contents in fundamental English coursebooks. *NIDA Journal of Language and Communication*, 21(27), 1–17. https://so04.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/NJLC/article/view/54551
20. Thumvichit, A. (2018). Cultural presentation in Thai secondary school ELT coursebooks: An analysis from intercultural perspectives. *Journal of Education and Training Studies*, 6(11), 99–112. https://doi.org/10.11114/jets.v6i11.3533
21. Wakhidah, N. J. I., & Adityarini, H. (2021). The Representation of World Englishes and Cultural Themes in Senior High School English Textbooks in Indonesia. In *Thirteenth Conference on Applied Linguistics (CONAPLIN 2020)* (pp. 393-400). Atlantis Press.
22. Yuen, K.M. (2011). The representation of foreign cultures in English textbooks. *ELT Journal, 65*(4), 458-466. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccq089
23. Zhang, H., & Nordin, N. R. M. (2025). Cultural Representation in Chinese University English Language Teaching Textbooks. *Education Sciences*, *15*(5), 601.