

# A Systematic Review of Cultural Representation in Educational Textbooks: Issues, Gaps, and Future Research Directions

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## ABSTRACT

Textbooks are essential tools in the education system, serving not only to transmit knowledge but also to shape students' identities, values, and worldviews. Recent research reveals that textbooks often contain ideological and cultural biases influencing learners' perceptions of themselves and others. This paper presents a systematic review of 23 Scopus-indexed studies (2010–2025) on cultural representation in educational textbooks. Using the PRISMA 2020 framework, data were thematically analysed to identify representation patterns, impacts on identity, and research gaps concerning cultural inclusion. Findings indicate a persistent dominance of Western cultural perspectives, with symbolic portrayals of local and global cultures, and notable gender bias reinforcing patriarchal norms. The review highlights the need for culturally just, inclusive, and empathetic textbook design. The outcomes contribute to a conceptual framework for advancing equitable cultural representation and guiding future educational research toward a more inclusive global curriculum.

**Keywords**---Systematic review; Textbooks; Cultural representation; Student identity; Educational inclusion; PRISMA 2020; Educational ideology

## INTRODUCTION

In the context of contemporary global education, textbooks play a crucial role as the primary tool for teaching and learning. It is not merely a teaching aid, but also serves as an ideological document that reflects the values, culture, and worldview of the society that produces it [9],[31]. Textbooks are the primary source of knowledge that shapes how students understand language, society, and their own identities. Therefore, every element contained in a textbook, whether linguistic text, illustrations, or learning activities, has the potential to convey a specific cultural message. Through content selection, language use, and visual representation, textbooks become a mirror to the value systems accepted within a community. However, in an increasingly multicultural world, questions arise as to how well today's textbooks fairly and sensitively reflect cultural diversity and inclusion.

Cultural diversity is now a core element of twentyfirst-century education. UNESCO [30] emphasises that education plays a role in shaping students who are not only knowledgeable but also empathetic, globallyminded, and appreciative of cultural differences. However, the main challenge facing the modern education system is how to balance the teaching of academic content with the cultivation of universal values that reject cultural bias and social stereotypes. In many contexts, textbooks still exhibit the dominance of certain cultures, particularly Western cultures often portrayed as models of progress, while non-Western cultures are positioned as passive, traditional, or exotic [28],[37]. This dominance not only shapes students' thinking about other cultures but also impacts how they evaluate themselves and their own society. Therefore, analysing cultural representations in textbooks is becoming increasingly important to assess the extent to which teaching materials inclusively depict social reality and human values.

The issue of cultural bias in textbooks is not new, but its impact is becoming increasingly complex in an interconnected global world. Students are now exposed to a variety of information sources, but textbooks still serve as the primary reference that forms the foundation of their thinking in school. When textbook content predominantly features the dominant culture, students indirectly develop a narrow understanding of the outside world. This situation risks producing a generation that is less sensitive to cultural differences and more prone to ethnocentric judgements. A study by Bettache [36] shows that colonial educational discourse is still rooted in the textbook publishing system, where Western values are often considered universal and rational, while nonWestern values are seen as needing improvement. This not only perpetuates global cultural power imbalances but also hinders students' ability to develop identities rooted in reflection and intercultural empathy [24],[4].

Besides cultural bias, gender imbalance and social stereotypes are also major concerns in textbook content evaluation. A study by Zhao and Wotipka [34] found that character representation in science and language textbooks still shows a dominance of male characters as the main figures, while women are often depicted in supporting or domestic roles. This phenomenon has also been observed in the Southeast Asian context, where patriarchal values and traditional norms still influence the narratives of educational materials [7]. The impact of such image repetition is not merely to shape students' perceptions of gender, but also to perpetuate an imbalanced social structure. Therefore, efforts to analyse and evaluate cultural and social representations in textbooks become an important step in building a more progressive and gender-equitable education system.

Besides the issue of content, the question of how students and teachers interpret and use textbooks is also a focus of recent research. In many cases, teachers use textbooks as the primary source of instruction without analysing the ideological dimensions or cultural biases they may contain [22],[26]. Lack of training and awareness of cultural literacy leads to teaching materials being used mechanically rather than reflectively. As a result, the implicit messages that shape students' worldviews are never addressed or critically discussed in the classroom. This creates an urgent need to increase reflective pedagogical awareness among teachers, while also providing textbooks designed based on principles of inclusion and cultural equity. Textbooks should serve not only as a linguistic resource, but also as a medium that fosters empathy, respects diversity, and strengthens students' identities.

In the context of academic research, various approaches have been used to assess culture in textbooks, including content analysis, critical discourse analysis, and multimodal analysis [12], [25]. However, most of these studies are still descriptive and limited to specific contexts. The lack of a comprehensive synthesis has resulted in a fragmented and incomplete understanding of the issue of cultural representation. Therefore, there is a need to conduct a systematic review based on transparent methodologies such as PRISMA or Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses [20]. The PRISMA approach allows for a comprehensive and structured assessment of the literature, thereby helping researchers identify key patterns, gaps, and trends in previous research. Through this approach, systematic reviews can build a strong empirical foundation for understanding how culture is represented in textbooks and how it affects students.

Overall, the importance of this study stems from the need to re-evaluate the function of textbooks in the increasingly complex and multicultural context of global education. Textbooks not only convey knowledge but also shape students' values and identities through the way they represent the world. This study does not aim to evaluate a specific set of textbooks, but rather to synthesise findings from various international studies to understand existing patterns of cultural representation, their impact on students, and the challenges in developing inclusive teaching materials. Through the systematic PRISMA approach, this study aims to strengthen the academic discourse on the relationship between education, culture, and identity. Therefore, efforts to review cultural representations in textbooks are crucial to ensure that educational materials used in schools not only convey knowledge but also instill universal human values based on empathy, inclusivity, and social justice.

Despite numerous studies addressing cultural representation, theoretical alignment remains inconsistent. Few reviews systematically connect critical cultural theories, such as Stuart Hall's representation theory and Byram's

Intercultural Communicative Competence with multimodal textbook analyses. Furthermore, methodological transparency is often lacking, especially regarding database selection, coding reliability, and thematic synthesis procedures. This review aims to fill these theoretical and methodological gaps.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Textbooks are the primary medium in the education system, serving not only to convey knowledge but also as a vehicle for disseminating values, ideology, and culture that shape students' thinking. However, many studies have found that textbooks are not neutral, but rather reflect specific worldviews that are often centred on the dominant values of a society or educational ideology [31],[9]. In the context of language teaching, particularly English as a second language, researchers have found that Western culture is often presented as a model of progress and rationality, while local or global cultures are only depicted peripherally [28],[37]. This phenomenon exposes students to biased discourse and shapes unbalanced cultural perceptions. Additionally, cultural bias also appears in visual and linguistic forms, where male images are more often associated with leadership, strength, and intellect, while female characters are frequently depicted in subordinate or domestic roles [34]. Issues like these show that textbook content needs to be critically re-examined to understand how cultural elements are shaped and presented. Based on these needs, the first objective of the study was formulated to identify the forms and frameworks of cultural elements in textbooks, including patterns of linguistic and visual representation that convey cultural values and meaning to students.

In the context of global learning, cultural representation in textbooks not only influences students' understanding of language but also shapes their awareness of cultural differences and diversity. Byram [4] and Risager [22] assert that intercultural communicative competence can only develop when students are able to evaluate and compare various value systems through teaching materials that reflect the real world. However, the literature indicates that many textbooks fail to balance local and international perspectives, leading students to perceive foreign cultures as more "true" than their own [36]. This effect is more pronounced in non-Western countries, where students are often exposed to cultural representations that do not reflect their social realities. Furthermore, teachers as cultural mediators are still inadequately trained to assess the ideological dimensions in textbooks [22], [26]. As a result, students passively absorb textbook content without critically reflecting on the values it conveys. In the long run, this situation affects students' identity formation and their readiness to interact in a multicultural society. Therefore, this study sets a second objective to analyse the impact of cultural representation on students' awareness and identity, by assessing how exposure to cultural content in textbooks influences their thinking, attitudes, and self-identity.

Although discussions about cultural representation in textbooks are gaining increasing attention, significant research gaps remain in terms of theory, methodology, and the context of study implementation. Most previous studies have assessed culture through descriptive approaches such as counting the frequency of cultural elements or thematic categories, without exploring the ideological meanings behind content selection and arrangement [31],[22]. Studies using critical discourse analysis and multimodal analysis are still limited, leading to an insufficient understanding of the power and ideological dimensions hidden within texts. From a methodological perspective, there is still insufficient use of systematic frameworks such as PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) to ensure transparency in literature selection and evaluation [20]. In addition, existing research has largely focused on developed countries such as China, Japan, and Europe, while the contexts of Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Africa remain underexplored [7],[13]. Cultural inclusivity is also rarely studied comprehensively, considering the elements of gender, religion, ethnicity, and social class that interact within modern textbooks. Therefore, to fill this gap, the third objective of this study is to assess the gaps and challenges in cultural inclusion in textbooks, focussing on the extent to which educational materials reflect the principles of social justice, gender balance, and universal cultural diversity.

## METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

This study uses a systematic review design based on the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Preferred Reporting Items

for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) to ensure that the literature collection and analysis process is conducted transparently, systematically, and reproducibly [20],[14]. This approach is highly suitable because the main objective of this study is to evaluate and synthesise existing research findings related to cultural representation in educational textbooks, including issues of inclusion, student identity, and gender bias in teaching materials.

As a qualitative systematic review study, this study did not involve direct field data collection, but focused on the critical analysis and synthesis of previous empirical studies. PRISMA 2020 is used as a reporting guideline because it helps researchers clearly detail each stage of literature search, selection, and evaluation [27]. This aligns with the requirements of evidence-based research, which demands transparency, replicability, and methodological accuracy.

### A. Research Design

This study is a qualitative systematic review with thematic synthesis. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to deeply assess cultural representation issues, not only in terms of the frequency of elements, but also in terms of the social meanings, ideologies, and values they contain [3],[31].

This study is based on three main questions that align with the research objectives, namely:

1. How are the form and framework of cultural elements represented in textbooks?
2. What is the impact of cultural representation on students' identity and awareness?
3. What are the gaps and challenges in creating cultural inclusion in modern textbooks?

This design allows researchers to integrate findings from various fields such as language education, social sciences, and visual communication to build a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being studied [33], [22].

### B. Database and Search Strategies

The literature search process was conducted in the Scopus database, as it is the largest bibliographic database containing highly indexed journals in the fields of education, linguistics, and sociology [6]. The search was conducted between May and August 2025 to ensure the data used was up-to-date and relevant to current developments.

The keywords used were built based on the main concepts of the study, namely textbooks, culture, and inclusion. Keyword combinations are used with the logical operators "AND" and "OR" as follows:

*("textbook" OR "language textbook" OR "ELT material") AND ("culture" OR "cultural representation") AND ("inclusivity" OR "gender bias" OR "intercultural competence").*

The search process is conducted by filtering results based on:

1. Publication year: 2010–2025
2. Publication languages: English and Malay
3. Document type: Journal article (peerreviewed)
4. Fields: Education, Linguistics, Cultural Studies, and Social Sciences

A total of 57 articles were identified from the initial search, and 23 were selected in the final screening. In addition to Scopus, the snowballing process was also used, which involved examining the reference lists of key articles to find other relevant studies [27].

### C. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The article selection criteria are divided into two main categories: inclusion and exclusion, as follows:

Category	Criteria
Inclusion	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Articles published between 2010– 2025.</li> <li>The article examines the representation of culture, gender, or identity in textbooks.</li> <li>Empirical studies or discourse analysis (including multimodal).</li> <li>The full article is available online.</li> </ol>
Exclusion	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conceptual study without empirical data.</li> <li>Proceedings, book chapters, or general reviews.</li> <li>A study of the curriculum without focussing on the content of textbooks.</li> <li>The article is not peer-reviewed.</li> </ol>

The selection of these criteria aims to ensure that all sources used truly contribute to a critical analysis of culture and identity in learning materials [28], [22].

### D. PRISMA 2020 Screening Process

The article selection process follows the four main phases of PRISMA as follows:

#### Identification Phase:

total of 57 articles were identified from the Scopus search results using the specified keywords.

#### Screening Phase:

The article titles and abstracts were reviewed, and 15 articles were excluded because they were not relevant to the study's focus.

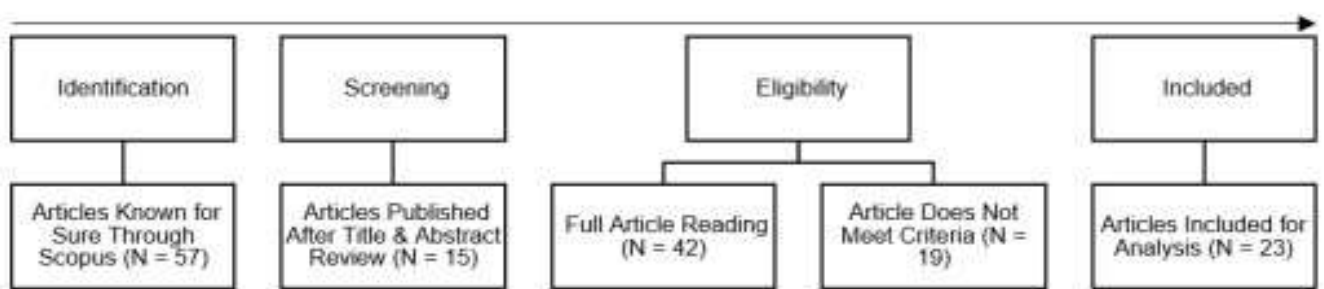
#### Eligibility Phase:

full reading was conducted on 42 articles. Of these, 19 articles were excluded because they only assessed pedagogical aspects without cultural analysis.

#### Inclusion Phase:

Finally, 23 articles met all inclusion criteria and were included in the thematic analysis.

The PRISMA flow chart below illustrates this screening process:



**Fig. 1: The PRISMA Flow Chart**

## E. Data Analysis Procedure

Data analysis was conducted using thematic synthesis based on the model by Braun and Clarke [3]. The analysis process involves six main steps: (i) familiarisation with the data, (ii) initial code generation, (iii) grouping codes into themes, (iv) theme review, (v) theme naming, and (vi) writing a thematic synthesis.

1. The analysis was conducted using NVivo 12 software to help identify the relationship between themes and the frequency of concepts. Three main themes emerged from this process:
2. The form and framework of cultural elements in textbooks.
3. The articles in this collection assess cultural types (source, target, and global), analytical models such as the 4P Moran Model and Kachru's Circles, as well as visual and linguistic elements that influence ideology [31], [22].
4. The impact of cultural representation on students.
5. This theme examines the impact of textbook content on students' intercultural awareness and identity formation [8], [22], [34].
6. Gaps and challenges in cultural inclusion. This theme encompasses issues of gender imbalance, lack of global benchmarks, and ethnocentric bias in learning materials [17], [36], [33].

This analytical approach allows the study not only to identify patterns of cultural representation but also to reveal the hidden ideologies formed through discourse and images in textbooks [25].

## F. Reliability, Validity, and Triangulation

To ensure accuracy and reliability, researchers implemented several data validation strategies. First, source triangulation was used by comparing findings from various disciplines (language education, visual communication, and sociology). Second, peer checking was conducted to assess the validity of the theme categorisation [3].

Additionally, this study adheres to the 2020 PRISMA checklist, which requires detailed documentation of search strategies, screening criteria, and synthesis processes [20]. In this way, inter-rater reliability can be improved, while the risk of researcher bias can be minimised.

In a qualitative context, validity is also determined by the consistency of themes and the conceptual coherence between studies. Previous studies examined showed recurring patterns in cultural bias, the influence of Western ideology, and a lack of gender inclusivity. This finding was cross-referenced with existing theories such as the Critical Cultural Awareness Model [4] and the Multimodal Discourse Analysis Framework [12] to strengthen the interpretation of the findings.

## FINDINGS

This section describes the findings of previous studies regarding the representation of cultural elements in the textbooks examined between 2010 and 2024. These studies involve various disciplines including language teaching, science, humanities, and social education. The analysis was conducted critically based on a synthesis of literature in the Scopus database, which showed that textbooks are not merely neutral teaching materials, but rather a medium of ideology and cultural hegemony that plays a significant role in shaping students' identities, worldviews, and intercultural awareness.

These findings are organised according to three main objectives: (i) identifying the forms and frameworks of cultural elements found in textbooks, (ii) analysing the impact of cultural representations on students' awareness and identity, and (iii) evaluating the gaps and challenges in achieving cultural inclusion in textbooks.

## A. Objective 1: Identify the forms and frameworks of cultural elements in textbooks.

Literature Reviews show that cultural representation in textbooks is complex, multi-layered, and unbalanced.

Cultural elements are typically categorised into three main types: source culture, target culture, and international or global culture. In the context of language teaching, particularly English as a Foreign Language (EFL/ELT), the target culture referring to Anglo-Western cultures still dominates textbook content, while minority and global cultures are often marginalised [18], [23].

A study by Weninger [31] found that language textbooks still exhibit ideological imbalances, where Western values and norms are considered universal references. The multimodal discourse analysis conducted revealed that images and text work together to maintain the existing cultural hierarchy. Similarly, a study by Tang and Liu [28] on primary school textbooks in China showed that the cultural elements depicted emphasised external products and practices such as food, clothing, and festivals, while internal perspectives and values like empathy, worldview, and belief systems were still limited.

Besides the form of cultural elements, various analytical frameworks have been developed to evaluate cultural representations in textbooks. Moran [16] introduced the 4P Model (Products, Practices, Perspectives, Persons), which emphasises the balance between cultural products and the human values and perspectives that produce them. However, many studies show that this model is still used in isolation without multimodal integration [25]. In the context of globalisation, Kachru [11] also introduced the Three Circles Model (Inner, Outer, Expanding Circles), which has been used by several researchers [13], [29] to assess the extent to which textbooks depict the diversity of English language cultures in the world. The findings indicate that textbooks from "inner circle" countries (such as the UK and the US) tend to highlight Western culture, while "expanding circle" countries (such as China and Indonesia) attempt to incorporate local elements but still within a Western linguistic framework.

Critically, this shows that textbooks often serve as ideological tools, not just language resources. Biassed cultural representations reinforce Western linguistic and epistemological hegemony in the international education system. Contemporary studies [35],[22] emphasise the need for a new framework that is more reflective, interdisciplinary, and considers multimodal, digital, and local narrative aspects so that culture is not merely visually represented but also understood in terms of social and emotional meaning.

Table 2 Previous Studies Related to the Form and Framework of Cultural Elements

Researcher & Year	Study Focus	Method	Key Findings
Weninger (2020) [31]	Multimodal analysis in language textbooks	Multimodal discourse analysis	Implicit ideologies and cultural biases are still dominant
Tang & Liu (2025) [28]	Cultural Representation in Primary School ELT Textbooks	Multimodal Discourse Analysis	Product and practice elements are more prominent than values and perspectives
Lu & Zhang (2024) [37]	Comparison of cultural elements in Chinese textbooks	Comparative content analysis	Local culture is symbolically represented but not in depth
Risager (2018) [22]	Representation of the world in language textbooks	Comparative analysis	Western centric cultural narratives still remain the main norm

## B. Objective 2: To analyse the impact of cultural representation on students' awareness and identity.

Findings from various studies emphasise that textbooks play a crucial role in shaping students' identities and intercultural awareness. Textbooks that present cultural diversity in a balanced way have the potential to develop intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and strengthen students' global identities [5], [19]. Conversely, if the content is laden with stereotypes, it risks forming narrow perceptions and ethnocentric attitudes towards other cultures.

The study by Franklin et al. [8] was among the earliest to emphasise the importance of culturally responsive teaching strategies, where students' identities and backgrounds are recognised as part of the learning process. Findings show increased motivation, empathy, and academic achievement when students see themselves positively represented in learning materials. In the current context, Peng and Xiong [22] found that teachers play a crucial role as "cultural mediators" in interpreting textbook content. However, many teachers still lack the training to assess the implicit cultural values in the teaching materials they use.

Another critical issue identified is gender stereotypes and social roles in textbooks. A study by Zhao and Wotipka [34] found that science textbooks in China still portray men as the main figures in scientific activities, while women are often depicted in passive or domestic roles. This pattern has also been observed in various other countries [7], [10], indicating that despite the increasing modernisation of the education world, gender bias remains deeply rooted in formal teaching materials.

Additionally, teacher involvement through Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) has also been proven to have a positive impact on the integration of cultural awareness in teaching [26]. PLCs not only enhance teachers' understanding of cultural diversity but also transform the way they evaluate and adapt textbooks to the local context. This shows that the impact of cultural representation is not unilateral; rather, it depends on the interaction between textbooks, teachers, and students' socio-cultural context.

From an educational psychology perspective, textbooks that positively portray cultural identity can boost students' self-esteem and sense of belonging, particularly in the context of minority students or students in multiethnic schools [2],[32]. Conversely, a lack of representation of one's own culture can lead to feelings of isolation and reduced learning motivation. Therefore, the issue of cultural representation is not merely an aesthetic matter, but also touches upon aspects of emotional well-being and social justice in education.

Table 3 Previous Studies Related to The Impact of Cultural Representation on Students

Researcher & Year	Study Focus	Findings	Recommendations
Franklin et al. (1996) [8]	Cultural Identity in Reading Instruction	Cultural Responsive Strategies Increase Student Motivation and Achievement	Teachers need to be trained in culturally responsive pedagogy
Zhao & Wotipka (2025) [34]	Gender analysis in Chinese science textbooks	Males are more dominant in scientific images, women are underrepresented	The visual design needs to be more balanced and reflective
Peng & Xiong (2022) [22]	Cultural values in business textbooks	Teachers are important in interpreting implicit cultural values	Cultural awareness training for educators needs to be strengthened
Smith (2023) [26]	PLC in culturally responsive teaching	PLC increases teachers' awareness and confidence regarding cultural diversity	Applied in teacher training and the education curriculum

### C. Objective 3: Assess gaps and challenges in cultural inclusion in textbooks.

Literature Reviews indicate that cultural inclusion gaps remain a major issue in the development and use of textbooks worldwide. Although there is increasing awareness of cultural diversity, there is still no uniform global benchmark for assessing the level of inclusion in textbooks [17]. This deficiency leads to varying cultural representations across countries and publishers, depending on their respective educational policies and national ideologies.

A systematic review study by Zhang et al. [33] of literature from 2012–2022 found that many textbooks still implicitly and superficially depict culture. Cultural representations are often presented as facts, rather than as a space for critical reflection or crosscultural comparison. In this context, students are trained to recognise other cultures but not necessarily to understand the values, thought systems, and life experiences behind them.

In terms of gender and ethnicity, Fithriani's [7] findings indicate that women are still underrepresented in lower-level English textbooks, while men are more often depicted as active and competitive. Bettache [36] also found that psychology textbooks in the West feature a dominance of white-skinned individuals and rarely depict ethnic diversity. This phenomenon indirectly contributes to cultural alienation for non-Western students using the material.

Additionally, editorial and commercial aspects also play a role in maintaining this gap. Publishers often filter or select content that is considered suitable for market demands and national ideology. As a result, sensitive issues such as discrimination, colonial history, or cultural conflicts are rarely included because of concerns about causing controversy. This causes textbooks to lose their critical value as a medium for social reflection.

From a disciplinary perspective, the study shows significant differences between science textbooks and humanities textbooks [1], [38]. Science books tend to emphasise an objective and positivistic approach with few cultural elements, whereas humanities books are more open in introducing values such as patriotism, empathy, and gender justice. This ravine highlights the need for interdisciplinary integration – for example, incorporating humanities perspectives into science teaching so that students can understand that science is also rooted in values and social context.

Overall, the main challenges of cultural inclusion in textbooks encompass three key dimensions:

1. Epistemological dimension – dominance of Western narratives and marginalisation of local cultures.
2. Representation dimension – visual and linguistic limitations that are still stereotypical.
3. Pedagogical dimension – lack of guidance and training for teachers to assess and adapt teaching materials with cultural sensitivity.

Therefore, some researchers [35], [15] proposed the development of a global model for assessing cultural inclusivity, which not only measures explicit content but also evaluates the implied meanings and ideologies conveyed. This model is recommended to involve various parties – including teachers, students, and publishers – to ensure that cultural representation in textbooks is truly fair, reflective, and based on crosscultural empathy.

**Table 4 Previous Studies Related to Cultural Inclusion Gaps and Challenges**

Researcher & Year	Study Focus	Identified Issues	Recommendations
Mostafaei & Parsazadeh (2020) [17]	Synergistic ELT Culture Model	There is no global benchmark for assessing cultural inclusion	Build an international standard model
Zhang and colleagues (2024) [33]	Systematic review study 2012–2022	Implicit and inconsistent cultural representation	Use an interdisciplinary and intersectional approach

Fithriani (2022) [7]	Gender analysis in ELT textbooks	Women are underrepresented and gender stereotypes are still strong.	Visual and narrative review is required.
Bettache (2025) [36]	Representation of groups in psychology books	White individual dominance in learning materials.	A multiethnic approach is recommended in material design.

The study findings indicate that despite efforts to improve cultural inclusion in textbooks, systemic and ideological biases remain deeply rooted in publishing and teaching practices. Biassed cultural representation not only diminishes the educational potential to shape empathetic global citizens but also reinforces existing cultural and linguistic stratification.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This discussion critically examines the implications of the study's findings for education, particularly the role of textbooks as a medium for cultural representation. The analysis results show that textbooks are not merely tools for conveying linguistic knowledge but also ideological instruments that function to shape students' worldviews, identities, and social values [31] , [22]. This finding proves that the selection of cultural content in textbooks is often influenced by epistemic power and national policies that maintain certain cultural hegemonies [35].

LITERATURE Reviews show two main paradigms in cultural representation theory. The first paradigm is the assimilative approach, which emphasises the target culture as the primary model for students to emulate, while the second paradigm is the pluralistic and critical approach, which demands that cultural diversity be recognised and represented in a balanced manner [28] , [29]. However, recent studies have found that textbooks are still dominated by Western narratives that portray local cultures as mere supplements [37], [13]. These findings highlight the urgent need to develop a more reflective and equitable theoretical framework for evaluating cultural representations in educational materials [33].

Besides the linguistic dimension, a multimodal analysis approach is becoming increasingly important in understanding how cultural ideologies are conveyed visually, symbolically, and through graphic design [31]. This approach allows researchers to delve into the layers of meaning hidden behind texts and images, and subsequently assess how students cognitively and emotionally interpret cultural meaning [25]. This is also related to new challenges in the digital era, where electronic and interactive textbooks add a new dimension to cultural representation [21].

The role of cultural representation in shaping student identity was also a major focus of discussion. Previous studies have shown that students who see their culture positively represented in textbooks tend to develop a sense of pride in their own identity and appreciate cultural diversity [8], [2]. Conversely, students who are not fairly represented will feel marginalised and lose motivation in their learning [32]. A study by Peng and Xiong [22] also showed that teachers act as cultural mediators, helping students interpret cultural meaning within their respective social contexts. This confirms that the impact of cultural representation in textbooks depends not only on the content, but also on the teacher's ability to connect it to students' experiences [26].

In terms of gender equality, the findings indicate that significant bias still exists in the content of textbooks. A study by Zhao and Wotipka [34] found that men are more dominant in images related to science and technology, while women are often depicted in passive roles. A similar phenomenon was also reported by Fithriani [7] in an analysis of English textbooks in Southeast Asia, where gender stereotypes continue to recur despite improvement efforts. This issue highlights the need for a systematic review process of learning materials to ensure the principle of gender equality is truly implemented [10].

The roles of teachers and professional learning communities also receive significant attention in shaping cultural awareness in schools. A study by Smith [26] confirms that professional learning communities (PLCs) can enhance teachers' ability to critically evaluate teaching materials and empathise with students from diverse backgrounds. Teachers are not merely disseminators of knowledge, but also cultural guides who interpret the hidden messages within textbooks [22]. Therefore, teacher training needs to emphasise reflective skills and cultural literacy to ensure content is taught in an inclusive manner [8].

From a fundamental educational perspective, the study findings indicate the need for a standardised system to assess the level of cultural inclusion in textbooks [17]. At this time, each country still uses different evaluation criteria, depending on national policies and ideologies. The lack of global benchmarks often leads to cultural inclusion being assessed subjectively and inconsistently [33]. In this context, a global cultural assessment framework needs to be developed to evaluate the balance between local and international cultures, as well as gender and ethnic representation [15].

Besides the basic aspects, commercial and editorial factors also impact the level of cultural inclusion in learning materials. Publishers often filter out sensitive issues such as discrimination or the history of colonialism to avoid controversy, even though these issues are important for building critical awareness among students [36]. Therefore, publishers and policymakers should view textbooks not just as economic products, but as spaces for social dialogue that can foster empathy and understanding between cultures.

From an epistemological perspective, the study of culture in textbooks needs to evolve from descriptive analysis to reflective analysis and social transformation. New research approaches such as classroom ethnography and action research can help understand how students interact with cultural materials in real-world contexts [1], [38]. This method allows researchers to evaluate not only what is contained in textbooks, but also how they are used, interpreted, and modified in daily teaching practice.

Overall, these findings emphasise that the relationship between textbooks and culture is complex and dynamic. A good textbook has the potential to be a bridge between communities, while a biased textbook can be a tool for maintaining ideology. Therefore, educational reform needs to be carried out comprehensively through three main strategies. First, developing a global assessment framework capable of objectively evaluating cultural inclusion [17],[33].

In conclusion, efforts to strengthen cultural inclusion in textbooks require a paradigm shift in curriculum design, publishing, and pedagogy. Textbooks should not be seen as static documents, but as living discourses that shape awareness, values, and relationships between people. By combining critical approaches, technology, and stakeholder collaboration, education can serve as a cultural bridge that unites global communities based on empathy, justice, and mutual respect [35], [31].

Future research should explore cultural inclusion through longitudinal textbook studies, digital multimodal analyses, and participatory approaches involving teachers and students. Such directions will bridge the gap between policy, publishing, and classroom realities.

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Second, continuous professional development for empathetically [21]. Third, the application of technological innovation and multimodal approaches that allow culture to be presented more interactively and

## A. Theoretical Integration

The identified themes correspond strongly with Critical Cultural Awareness [4] and Multimodal Discourse Analysis [12]. Western-centric visual and linguistic codes reinforce Hall's [4] concept of representational power, suggesting textbooks act as ideological agents shaping identity and inclusion.

## B. Limitations and Recommendations

The review's reliance on Scopus-indexed literature may exclude regionally published studies, limiting the cultural scope of findings. Future research should include grey literature and local-language publications to capture diverse educational contexts. Mixed methods and classroom ethnography are also recommended to link representational analysis with lived classroom experiences.

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