

Cultural representation in junior secondary English textbooks from a social semiotic perspective: a case study of the People's Education Press "Go For It" series

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Abstract: This study examines cultural representations in the junior secondary "Go For It" English textbooks using the FARCET framework and a social semiotic analysis of text–image relations. Results show that cultural items increase across grades, but non-specific and inner-circle (English-speaking) content dominates, while Chinese and other cultures are underrepresented. Most items focus on practices, with less attention to products, figures, or communities, aligning with a task-based teaching approach. Cultural presentation remains largely implicit, with images mainly supporting language learning rather than explicit cultural instruction. Teacher interviews underscore the practicality of multimodal resources, while also calling for clearer presentation of cultural differences between Chinese and foreign cultures, increased local content, and the use of more concise language. The study recommends diversifying cultural content and improving text–image integration to foster cultural awareness.

Keywords: cultural representation; junior secondary; social semiotics; textbook

1 Introduction

The Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (2022) designate "cultural awareness" as a core literacy, emphasizing students' international outlook and intercultural competence (Ministry of Education, 2022). In basic education, this cultivation relies chiefly on textbook content and presentation, making textbooks key vehicles for cultural formation. Textbooks are not value-neutral. As both teaching tools and "cultural artefacts" shaped by ideology and markets [1], their cultural portrayals are deliberately constructed and influence students' global vision and cultural confidence.

Regarding the cultural objectives of the Standards and the ideological attributes of textbooks, a central question arises: To what extent do current junior-secondary English textbooks meet these deeper requirements and build a balanced local–global cultural schema? This study systematically analyzes the cultural representations in five volumes of Compulsory English Textbook (Go For It series; hereafter, GFI) published by People's Education Press to clarify their cultural stance and formative potential.

2 Literature review

2.1 Cultural representation

In cultural studies, representation is not a mirror of objective culture but, as Stuart Hall notes, the process by which

meaning is produced and exchanged through language, discourse, and images [2].

Crucially, representation is productive, not neutral. Textbooks actively construct culture by selecting materials—choices that embody value orientations, foreground some information, and downplay others—thereby shaping learners' understandings across multiple modalities.

2.2 Research on cultural representation in textbooks

Scholarship beyond China has developed along two complementary approaches. One employs quantitative content analysis to classify and measure cultural content—drawing on frameworks such as Kachru's three-circle model and the capital "C"/small "c" distinction [3], thereby establishing how culture is distributed in textbooks. The other adopts a critical lens, emphasizing that textbooks are ideologically constructed cultural artefacts and examining the power relations encoded in their representations [1]. Despite this breadth, much empirical work remains text-centric, with limited interrogation of how non-verbal modalities, particularly images, contribute to meaning-making.

Within the Chinese context, studies have expanded substantially in scope and rigor. Diachronic analyses indicate increases in the proportions of both Chinese and world cultures under the new standards, while synchronic analyses of senior-secondary and tertiary materials often report a comparatively low presence of native culture and imbalanced cultural input [4][5]. Two limitations persist: research has tended to concentrate on senior-secondary and tertiary levels, leaving junior secondary under-examined; and a text-first orientation continues to marginalize the role of visual elements in constructing cultural meanings.

2.3 Social semiotic concepts

To overcome the "text-over-image" bias, this study adopts a multimodal, social-semiotic lens to examine how visuals make meaning [6]. Unlike traditional semiotics, social semiotics foregrounds how signs operate in social contexts. Reading images posits a "visual grammar": elements such as composition, color, and gaze enable images to co-construct meaning with text—i.e., multimodality.

Multimodal analysis is now prominent in textbook research, revealing how image–text relations convey ideologies and values (e.g., Painter, Martin, & Unsworth, 2013). Yet comprehensive applications to cultural representation in Chinese junior secondary English textbooks, especially alongside content-analytic frameworks like FARCET, remain limited.

3 Research design

Grounded in social-semiotic multimodality and the FARCET framework, this study combines content analysis with semi-structured teacher interviews to examine the distribution and presentation of cultural content in GFI junior secondary English textbooks and the coordination of text – image meanings. The section specifies research questions and objects, outlines methods, and details data collection and coding.

3.1 Research questions

Given the limited attention to junior secondary textbooks and image-text coordination in the literature, this study investigates: (1) According to the FARCET framework, what cultural types and themes are presented in GFI? (2) In what forms are these cultural contents presented in GFI? (3) How do frontline teachers perceive cultural representation in the textbooks, and what attitudes and expectations do they hold for classroom use?

3.2 Research objects

To incorporate classroom perspectives, five purposefully sampled in-service junior secondary English teachers from School Y (City X, Jiangxi), each with 10-15 years of experience and extensive GFI use, participated in 20-30 minute face-to-face, audio-recorded interviews in May 2023 with written consent. The interviews explored the understanding of cultural representation, classroom use, and suggestions for future improvement.

3.3 Research methods

This study adopts a describe–interpret–corroborate design integrating content analysis, social-semiotic multimodal analysis, and semi-structured interviews to ensure methodological triangulation.

Content analysis coded texts, task instructions, images, and text–image combinations at the unit–section–item level using FARCET categories and modality indicators, with a piloted manual, dual independent coding, reliability verification, and descriptive statistics guiding item selection.

3.4 Data collection

Culturally representative items—illustrations, tables, posters, comics, and other visuals in input materials and exercises—were systematically screened and numbered per FARCET (Zhang et al., 2022), excluding tables of contents, covers, and decorative elements. Eligible items are mapped to a FARCET category linked to text or tasks through semantic associations. Decorative or noncultural graphics and entirely repetitive patterns were omitted, while repetitive patterns with new contextual meanings counted as new. Pilot testing on 10% of items calibrated criteria and fields, and two researchers independently screened and reconciled lists, with third-party review if needed. Image records included location, type, linked text, cultural type, repeat status, and context

4 Conclusion

This study used FARCET-based content analysis, social-semiotic analysis of text-image relations (T-I-R), and teacher interviews to examine the GFI junior secondary English series. Cultural items increase by grade, but non-specific content dominates, and inner-circle cultures are emphasized over Chinese and other regions. Practices are the most common type, with products following, while figures and communities are rare—reflecting a task-and-skills-oriented approach.

To enhance cultural learning, combining multimodal resources with clear conceptual framing and contrastive prompts, along with tailored T-I-R tasks, is advised. Further, expanding geographic coverage, diversifying images, improving alignment, and providing concise explanatory text are recommended. Limitations include single-series focus, subjective coding, and image-only T-I-R; future research should address these by broadening scope, adding modalities, triangulating outcomes, and leveraging new tools.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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