

## CULTURAL REPRESENTATION IN ERLANGGA ARABIC TEXTBOOKS (PHASES D–F): A MULTIMODAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS FOR THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM

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Article Info	Abstract
<p><b>Article History</b> Received: December 2025 Revised: January 2026 Accepted: February 2026 Published: April 2026</p> <p><b>Keywords</b> Cultural representation; Arabic language textbook; Multimodal discourse analysis; Multimodal content analysis; Intercultural competence;</p>	<p><i>Despite the Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on intercultural competence, the limited number of multimodal analyses of cultural representation in Arabic-language textbooks in Indonesia remains a concern. This study investigates how local, Arab–Islamic, and global cultural elements are represented in three Erlangga Arabic textbooks for Phases D–F using Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) and the Multimodal Content Analysis (MMCA) template proposed by Serafini and Reid (2023). A total of 32 multimodal units were analysed. The findings reveal a clear imbalance in cultural representation. Local culture dominates across phases (75% in Phase D; 69.23% in Phase E; 72.73% in Phase F), while Arab–Islamic and global cultures are minimally represented. Big C cultural elements account for the vast majority of representations (over 85% within local culture), whereas small c elements appear only sporadically and exclusively within local contexts. Furthermore, most cultural representations are presented implicitly through visual–verbal integration rather than through explicit cultural explanation. These findings suggest that current Arabic language textbooks underrepresent cultural diversity and offer limited support for the development of intercultural communicative competence. The study recommends more balanced inclusion of local, Arab–Islamic, and global cultures, greater integration of small c cultural practices, and more explicit cultural framing to support teachers' pedagogical mediation.</i></p>
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### INTRODUCTION

The development of foreign language education today shows a shift in orientation from merely mastering linguistic aspects to fostering communicative competence that includes cultural awareness and sensitivity (Hossain, 2024; Sarwari et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2025). This shift aligns with the demands of the globalisation era, which emphasise adapting to diverse cultural contexts, developing intercultural communication skills, and cultivating a broad global perspective (Zhou et al., 2025). In this context, language functions not only as a tool of communication but also as a means of constructing social interaction and understanding intercultural dynamics.

In a study explored the role of culture in teaching Arabic as a foreign language, Grozdanoski (2019) argues that language and culture are closely interrelated and inseparable. Cultural awareness is even considered an integral component of the language-learning process (Haliq et al., 2025). Accordingly, Arabic language instruction cannot be carried out without

introducing learning elements connected to the cultural background of its speakers. Consistent with this view, Al Farisi et al. (2024) emphasised that integrating language and culture is imperative and cannot be overlooked in the context of foreign language education.

According to Keles & Yazan (2023), there is a growing consensus in language education research that learners need to study the culture associated with the target language while also understanding how to represent their own culture through that language. In line with this perspective, Cortazzi & Jin (1999) distinguish three types of culture in the context of English language teaching: *target culture*, referring to the culture of native speakers of the language being learned; *source culture*, referring to the learners' own cultural background; and *international target culture*, referring to the cultures of countries in which English is used not as a first or second language but as an international language for intercultural communication.

In Arabic language education in Indonesia, integrating cultural elements into the learning process has become an established practice. The current *Merdeka Curriculum*, as well as the *2013 Curriculum*, has positioned cultural knowledge and understanding as one of the key learning targets, alongside linguistic and communicative competence (Direktur Jenderal Pendidikan Islam [Dirjen Pendis], 2024; Kementerian Agama [Kemenag], 2019). In the *Merdeka Curriculum*, this cultural competence encompasses three main dimensions: Arab-Islamic culture as the target culture, Indonesian local culture as the source culture, and global or international culture reflecting Arabic's status as an international language (Dirjen Pendis, 2024). These three cultural dimensions must be incorporated into language instruction so that learning does not focus solely on linguistic aspects, but also fosters intercultural awareness and skills that form intercultural communicative competence, an essential capability in an increasingly globalised world (Hicham et al., 2025).

Within this framework, textbooks, as the primary source of language instruction, play a strategic role in introducing cultural dimensions. In addition to serving as a medium for delivering linguistic content, textbooks also function as a vehicle for internalising the cultural values embedded in the target language (Kuraedah et al., 2022). Through textbooks, learners are exposed not only to the forms and meanings of the language as linguistic input but also to representations of cultural values and ideologies conveyed through the text (Pan & Zhu, 2022). Consequently, examining the cultural content of textbooks becomes essential for determining the extent to which Arabic language education supports the development of learners' cultural awareness and intercultural competence.

Previous studies on cultural representation in language textbooks indicate that achieving a balance between local, target, and global cultures remains a significant challenge. Kuraedah et al. (2022) found that both English and Arabic textbooks used in Indonesian secondary schools predominantly highlight local culture. The Arabic textbooks tend to linguicism, with visual content dominated by Islamic symbols. In contrast, the English textbooks are more inclusive of Indonesian cultural elements through verbal texts such as dialogues and local narratives. These findings suggest that cultural representation in textbooks tends to reinforce national and religious identities rather than foster intercultural competence.

Recent developments in the cultural studies of language textbooks indicate a shift toward *Multimodal Discourse Analysis* (MDA). This approach views communication as a multimodal construct, involving the interplay of multiple semiotic resources across texts and interactions. Through MDA, researchers examine how different modes, such as visual and verbal elements, static and moving images, layout design, graphics, sound, facial expressions, proxemics, and bodily movement, are integrated and orchestrated to create a coherent meaning system deliberately designed to achieve specific communicative purposes (Hafner, 2024).

Prihatiningsih et al. (2021), for example, examined the types of culture represented in two English textbooks for seventh-grade junior high school students in Indonesia and analysed how cultural meanings were conveyed through verbal and visual modes. Their study identified an

imbalance in cultural representation across the two textbooks: the source culture appeared far more frequently than the target or international cultures, and the verbal and visual modes were used unevenly.

Li et al. (2023) and Hao et al. (2023) both analysed how elements of *Big C* culture, which encompass visible and tangible aspects such as literature and music, and *small c* culture, which refers to routine, everyday cultural practices such as social habits and lifestyles, are represented verbally and visually in textbooks. Li et al. (2023) found that *Big C* cultural elements dominate English textbooks in China and Mongolia. Although culturally rich, their multimodal representations fail to capture the diversity of values and lifestyles (*small c*) that reflect a broader global context. In contrast, Hao et al. (2023) reported that *small-c* cultural elements are more prominent than *Big C* elements in Spanish textbooks used in China.

Jang et al. (2024) also employed a multimodal approach to identify ideological biases and cultural adaptation strategies in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbooks in South Korea. Their findings indicate that the textbooks convey a contradictory understanding of multiculturalism: on the one hand, they promote values of globalisation and national pride, yet on the other hand, they continue to reinforce Western centrism and a monolithic cultural orientation. The visual representations in the textbooks are dominated by white characters and patterns of interaction centred on Anglo-American culture. Moreover, the textbooks fail to present diverse and realistic global communication scenarios and instead embed implicit values of national pride constructed through Western perspectives and idealised images of the Western world.

The body of research thus far suggests that multimodal approaches have deepened our understanding of how cultural meanings are constructed in foreign language textbooks. However, comparable research on Arabic language textbooks remains relatively limited. To address this gap, the present study adopts an MDA approach to examine how cultural elements are represented multimodally, through both verbal and visual modes, in Arabic language textbooks used in Indonesia.

To address this gap, the present study adopts an MDA approach to examine how cultural elements are represented multimodally, through both verbal and visual modes, in Arabic language textbooks used in Indonesia. Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following research questions: How are local, Arab–Islamic, and global cultural elements represented multimodally in Arabic language textbooks under the Merdeka Curriculum? How are Big C and small c cultural elements distributed across these representations? And To what extent are cultural representations presented explicitly or implicitly through visual–verbal integration?

## RESEARCH METHOD

### Research Design

This study employs a *Multimodal Discourse Analysis* (MDA) approach using *Multimodal Content Analysis* (MMCA) as proposed by Serafini & Reid (2023). The analytical procedure followed eleven stages: (1) recognizing an area of interest; (2) developing initial research questions; (3) constructing the data corpus; (4) defining the object of study; (5) developing initial categories; (6) developing the analytical template; (7) testing the analytical template; (8) applying the analytical template to the data corpus; (9) constructing potential themes; (10) examining the implications of the analysis; and (11) dissemination of findings.

### Data Corpus

The data corpus consists of three Arabic language textbooks published by Erlangga: *Bahasa Arab untuk MTs Kelas VII* (Phase D) by Saefuloh (2025), *Bahasa Arab untuk Kelas X* (Phase E) by Saefuloh (2025a), and *Mumtaz Bahasa Arab untuk SMA/SMK Kelas XI* (Phase F) by Maspalah et al. (2025). The textbooks were selected purposively because they are designed in accordance with the *Merdeka Curriculum* and comply with the most recent regulation,

namely the Decree of the *Director General of Islamic Education (Dirjen Pendis) No. 3302 of 2024*.

Phases D–F were chosen because, at these stages, students are systematically introduced to multimodal texts in Arabic language learning (Dirjen Pendis, 2024). Textbooks published by the Ministry of Religious Affairs (revised edition 2020) were excluded because they are still based on the *2013 Curriculum* (Mutiarra et al., 2025). Accordingly, Erlangga textbooks for Phases D–F were established as the research corpus.

The data consist of multimodal texts, namely texts that integrate visual and verbal modes, representing cultural aspects. Visual elements that are purely decorative, such as ornaments, or that do not represent socio-cultural meanings, such as images of common school supplies used in various contexts, were excluded from the analysis. A total of 32 multimodal units were identified and coded: 8 from the Phase D textbook, 13 from the Phase E textbook, and 11 from the Phase F textbook. Multimodal texts featuring identical visual and written modes that appeared repeatedly within the same textbook were consolidated into a single analytical unit to avoid bias resulting from duplication. All data were organised and tabulated using Microsoft Excel to facilitate systematic comparison and frequency calculation.

### Research Instruments and Data Collection

The data collection instrument was an analytical template adapted from Serafini & Reid (2023). The template was developed based on initial categories encompassing visual and verbal modes and intermodal relations between them. To ensure analytical reliability, the template was piloted on one chapter unit from each textbook to confirm consistency of categories and coding accuracy. After being deemed appropriate, the template was applied to the entire data corpus.

During data collection, all multimodal texts containing both visual and verbal modes were identified and recorded, and the intermodal relationships between the two modes were determined. The analysis of visual–verbal relations employed the *Intermodal Identification* framework proposed by Unsworth & Cléirigh (2009), which conceptualizes meaning-making as a process of mutual identification between visual and verbal modes. Within this framework, visuals may function as *Tokens* and language as *Values*, or vice versa, depending on the direction of interpretive meaning-making.

### Data Analysis

The collected data were subsequently coded into cultural categories based on the classification issued by Dirjen Pendis (2024), namely local culture, Arab-Islamic culture, and global culture. This classification was integrated with the concepts of Big C culture, referring to visible and concrete cultural manifestations such as arts, history, and cultural figures, and small c culture, which encompasses implicit and abstract socio-cultural values, norms, and beliefs (Lee, 2009).

The coding results were analyzed descriptively and thematically and then grouped into potential themes, including comparisons of representations of local, Arab-Islamic, and global cultures; comparisons between Big C and small c cultural representations; and tendencies toward implicit or explicit cultural presentation. These themes were derived through a process of categorization and frequency counts of each cultural type. The final stage of analysis involved interpreting the findings' implications and disseminating the results as an integral part of the overall MMCA procedure.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Research Findings

The analysis indicates an imbalance in cultural representation in Arabic-language textbooks across all phases examined. This imbalance is evident in both the proportions of local, Arab–Islamic, and global cultural representations and in the balance between Big C and small-c cultural aspects presented through verbal and visual modes.

Table 1  
Cultural Representation in Arabic Language Textbooks

Cultural Representation		Phase D Textbook		Phase E Textbook		Phase F Textbook	
		n	%	n	%	n	%
Local Culture	Big C	5	62,50%	8	61,54%	7	63,64%
	small c	1	12,50%	1	7,69%	1	9,09%
Arab–Islamic Culture	Big C	2	25,00%	3	23,08%	2	18,18%
	small c	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
Global Culture	Big C	0	0,00%	1	7,69%	1	9,09%
	small c	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
Total		8	100%	13	100%	11	100%

Table 2  
Representation of “Big C” and “small c” in Arabic Language Textbooks

Cultural Representation		Local Culture		Arab-Islamic Culture		Global Culture	
		n	%	n	%	n	%
Big C	Architecture	5	21,74%	1	14,29%	0	0,00%
	Clothing	4	17,39%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
	Geography	1	4,35%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
	Arts and Sports	1	4,35%	3	42,86%	0	0,00%
	Culinary/Cuisine	2	8,70%	0	0,00%	2	100,00%
	Ethnicity	0	0,00%	1	14,29%	0	0,00%
	Monuments	2	8,70%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
	Transportation	1	4,35%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
	Worship/Rituals	0	0,00%	2	28,57%	0	0,00%
	Occupations	2	8,70%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
	Family	1	4,35%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
	Business/Market	1	4,35%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
	Small c	Intergender Interaction	1	4,35%	0	0,00%	0
Politeness		2	8,70%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
<b>Total</b>		<b>23</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>100%</b>

The data presented in Table 1 indicate that cultural representations in the textbooks across all phases are heavily dominated by local culture. Local cultural content accounts for 75% in Phase D, 69.23% in Phase E, and 72.73% in Phase F, showing a consistent pattern across levels. This suggests that the textbooks strongly prioritize local cultural identity while offering only limited exposure to Arab–Islamic and global cultures. As a result, students are provided with a relatively narrow cultural perspective, with insufficient opportunities to engage with broader cultural diversity through the learning materials. In addition, Table 2 shows that cultural representations in Arabic language textbooks are still largely framed through Big C culture. In the local culture category, Big C elements make up 86.96% of the content, with a particular emphasis on visible and formal cultural expressions such as architecture and clothing. Similarly, Arab–Islamic and global cultures are represented only through Big C elements. In the case of Arab–Islamic culture, these appear in the form of art, religious practices, and rituals, while global culture is presented only through culinary content, specifically Western breakfast. The minimal inclusion of small c culture shows that the textbooks do not yet represent cultural diversity in a balanced way, especially in relation to everyday life, values, and routine social practices.

## Discussion

### *Dominance of Local Cultural Representation*

Cultural representations in the textbooks are dominated by local culture, while representations of Arab–Islamic and global cultures are very limited. As shown in the findings, local culture is primarily represented through Big C elements, with architecture and clothing as the most dominant aspects. Other aspects, such as geography, arts and sports, culinary culture, monuments, transportation, professions, family life, business/markets, appear only sporadically. Meanwhile, small-c cultural elements are minimally represented, limited to intergender interactions and politeness practices.

In contrast, representations of Arab–Islamic culture in the textbooks are confined to three main elements: first, Islamic religious practices such as prayer (*ṣalāh*) and Qur'an recitation; second, Islamic-themed calligraphic art; and third, mosque architecture characterized by domes. The relationship between verbal and visual modes reflects an *intermodal intensive identification*, in which visual elements depict the forms of mosques and *muṣallā* that are not explicitly explained in the verbal text (Unsworth & Cléirigh, 2009). These visual representations clearly distinguish between mosques and *muṣallā* (“*musala*” in Indonesian), with the latter depicted in architectural styles specific to the Indonesian context. This representation suggests that the textbook authors conceptualize *musala* as a religious institution rooted in Indonesian local culture, whereas mosques are perceived as symbols of Arab culture. Within the Indonesian cultural context, the term *musala* has a distinct meaning from that of a mosque; it refers to a smaller prayer space not used for Friday prayers or large-scale religious activities (Nasikhah, 2020).

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the dome is not an architectural element that authentically originates from Arab culture. Dome structures were known in ancient civilizations such as Mesopotamia, Roman, and Persian societies, before being widely adopted and later identified as part of Islamic architecture, particularly in mosques across the Middle East (Azzahrah et al., 2023). Moreover, in the analyzed textbooks, depictions of domed mosques appear in explanations of the homes' surroundings in Indonesia. Thus, although these illustrations feature architectural elements associated with Middle Eastern styles, they essentially represent the lived context of predominantly Muslim Indonesian society rather than a direct reflection of Arab culture. This further underscores that representations of Arab culture in the textbooks remain highly limited and have yet to adequately portray the diversity and richness of Arab culture, despite the relatively sufficient inclusion of Islamic cultural elements.

Meanwhile, representations of global culture appear only in a minimal form, namely through culinary elements. For instance, the text “*atanāwalu al-fuṭūr* (I have breakfast)” is accompanied by a visual depiction of bread and milk. The relationship between the text and the image constitutes a form of possessive intermodal identification, in which the visual element provides additional information that is not explicitly stated in the verbal text, namely the type of food consumed at breakfast (Unsworth & Cléirigh, 2009). Bread and milk are culturally recognized as a *Western breakfast* (Kuwahara et al., 2023). However, this representation is considered less contextualized, as the depiction of breakfast appears within the theme “*al-Ansyīṭah al-yaumiyyah liṭ-ṭālib* (students’ daily activities), which ideally should present food items more relevant to the lived realities of students in Indonesia. Doing so would allow the material to represent local cultural practices better.

This imbalance in representation indicates that Arabic language textbooks have not yet presented cultural diversity in a balanced manner. Ideally, language learning should function as a process of cross-cultural exploration that equips learners not only with linguistic competence but also with the understanding necessary to communicate effectively across diverse social and cultural contexts (Hossain, 2024). These findings are consistent with those of Kuraedah et al.

(2022), which show that Arabic-language textbooks in Indonesia tend to foreground local culture over foreign cultures and place strong emphasis on Islamic cultural elements.

#### *Dominance of “Big C” Culture and the Limited Cultural Diversity*

The imbalance in cultural representation in Arabic language textbooks is evident not only in the disproportion among local, Arab–Islamic, and global cultures but also in the imbalance between Big C and small c aspects. Overall, Big C cultural elements are more prominent across all textbooks, as discussed in the findings section.

Big C representations in the context of local culture are manifested through various visual elements, such as building architecture and *musala* with roof designs characteristic of Indonesia. Geographical aspects are also depicted through the background of houses in mountainous areas, illustrated by mountains, as well as through the address “Jl. Pajajaran No. 40,” which serves as a location marker in Indonesia.

Other Big C cultural representations are evident in the clothing depicted, such as the black *peci* (traditional Indonesian cap) as a distinctive symbol of Indonesia, as well as in professions that reflect Indonesia's geographical conditions, such as farmers and fishermen. In addition, illustrations of traditional markets depict local economic activities alongside iconic monuments such as the National Monument (*Monumen Nasional/Monas*) in Jakarta and the *Suro and Boyo* (Shark and Crocodile) statues in Surabaya. Traditional modes of transportation, such as *becak* (pedicabs), further reinforce the local cultural characteristics portrayed in these images.

At first glance, these elements appear to reflect Indonesian cultural identity. However, upon closer examination, the representations remain superficial, failing to capture the true diversity of Indonesian culture adequately. The elements presented are more oriented toward a uniform and urban national culture rather than the rich regional cultures that are ethnically and geographically diverse. In fact, Indonesia possesses highly diverse geographical characteristics, encompassing mountainous regions, coastal areas, and other landscapes that contribute to cultural variation, which is reflected in the diversity of ethnic groups, local languages, arts, and customs across different regions (Astari et al., 2024). The absence of such geographical and cultural variation indicates that the textbooks tend to project an image of “modern Indonesia” rather than “multicultural Indonesia.”

Furthermore, the depiction of families in the textbooks reinforces this ideological tendency. Families are consistently represented as a father, a mother, and one or two children, which aligns with the national policy model of the “small, happy, and prosperous family” promoted by the government (Pemerintah Republik Indonesia, 2014). This representation is not merely a visual choice but also reflects the internalization of particular social values embodied in an “ideal” family structure.

In reality, family structures in Indonesia are far more diverse. Several ethnic groups, such as the *Lani* people in Papua and communities in Aceh, commonly have four to seven children to sustain community continuity. Javanese society has also embraced the principle of “*banyak anak banyak rezeki*” (many children bring abundant fortune), which positions large families as a positive cultural value (Laksono & Wulandari, 2021). Nevertheless, the textbooks present a homogeneous image of the modern family, specifically, the modern Muslim family, thereby obscuring the social and cultural diversity that genuinely characterizes Indonesian society.

Overall, these findings indicate that cultural representations in the textbooks remain focused on macro-level Big C elements, while the depth and diversity of Indonesian culture are insufficiently accommodated. The complexity of cultural realities is often simplified and portrayed in a homogeneous way. Representations of Arab and global cultures are also minimal, generally appearing only in the form of religious rituals or artistic expressions such as calligraphy, as well as examples of Western breakfast, all of which are positioned within the context of Indonesian society. Consequently, more authentic representations of Arab and global cultural contexts are not adequately conveyed.

These limitations underscore that cultural construction in textbooks tends to remain at the surface level, thereby failing to reflect the true complexity of culture. This finding is consistent with Uzum et al. (2021), who report that foreign language textbooks in the United States, including Arabic-language textbooks, often depict speech communities as homogeneous and essentialized groups, while marginalized communities are presented only symbolically or entirely omitted.

#### *Limited Representation of Small c Culture*

Representations of small-c culture in the textbooks are minimal and appear only in the context of local culture. The visualizations presented depict patterns of intergender interaction typical of Indonesian Muslim society, in which interaction is neither entirely segregated nor entirely unregulated, but is regulated by norms of propriety. In addition, gestures of politeness are shown, such as handshaking and a slight bow during introductions. The textbooks depict male and female students occupying the same spaces, such as classrooms or school environments. However, they are never shown engaging in direct interaction with one another. Such visual representations portray a social setting that adheres to the cultural norms of Indonesian Muslim society, in which intergender proximity is regulated through religiously informed social boundaries.

This pattern of representation aligns with the findings of Munif et al. (2025), who found that Islamic-oriented educational structures in Indonesia tend to foster a culture of social separation between males and females, resulting in minimal intergender interaction. This finding is further supported by a case study of an Islamic-oriented school in Indonesia, which shows that the learning process systematically internalizes Islamic ethics of social interaction. Such pedagogical practices emphasize the application of the principles of *gaḍḍ al-baṣar* (lowering the gaze) and *ḥifẓ al-mu'āmalah* (maintaining propriety in social interaction), which function as normative mechanisms for regulating communication boundaries between males and females through the control of gaze and the observance of politeness in everyday interactions (Fauzia et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, the representation of social interaction described above is derived solely from the visual mode. When analyzed multimodally, the visual–verbal relationship in the data demonstrates a pattern of intermodal intensive identification (Unsworth & Cléirigh, 2009), in which the images function primarily as visualizations of the grammatical meanings explained by the verbal text, namely, changes in verb forms that represent differences in gender and number of participants, rather than as representations of intergender social relations.

In addition to patterns of intergender interaction, representations of small c culture in the textbooks are also manifested through forms of politeness in social interaction, one of which is expressed through bodily gestures. A female student is depicted introducing her friend to another person, while the student being introduced is shown shaking hands with the newly met individual. Both individuals involved in the handshake are represented with slightly bowed postures, accompanied by the text “*Man hāzihi? Hāzihi ṣadīqatī, ismuhā Farīdah*” (“Who is this? This is my friend; her name is Faridah”).

The visual–verbal relationship in this data forms a pattern of intermodal circumstantial identification (manner), in which the visual elements depict the manner of social interaction that is not explicitly realized in the verbal text, namely, the act of shaking hands accompanied by a slight bow as a form of etiquette and politeness in an introductory context (Unsworth & Cléirigh, 2009).

In the Indonesian cultural context, handshaking is a symbol of friendliness and enthusiasm (Meli, 2014). This gesture is commonly performed when greeting guests, friends, or others, upon parting, or when offering an apology (Subiyanto, 2018). Handshaking is also practiced within egalitarian relationships without signaling dominance, in contrast to hand-

kissing, which signifies social hierarchy (Destiani et al., 2025). In the textbooks, handshaking is represented as part of the introduction process.

The gesture of slightly bowing the body is also found across various ethnic groups in Indonesia. In Javanese culture, for example, bowing is regarded as an expression of respect and politeness, in line with Javanese values that reject aggressive or harsh behavior (Makmur & Widyaningrum, 2019). In Sundanese culture, the expression *punten* (excuse me) when passing in front of someone is commonly accompanied by a slight bow as a sign of humility (Hidayat & Hafiar, 2019). In situations involving equal social hierarchy, this gesture is usually performed more subtly, such as by slightly bowing the body or merely lowering the head (Fauziah et al., 2024). Gesture is employed when two female students are being introduced, namely by slightly bowing the body while shaking hands.

Overall, representations of small c culture in the textbooks illustrate how everyday cultural elements are presented through visualizations of social interaction and gestures of politeness. Although the textbooks depict certain aspects of local culture, such as intergender social boundaries aligned with Indonesian Muslim norms, as well as etiquette involving handshaking and slight bowing as forms of respect, these representations remain limited. Even widespread and culturally salient social practices in the Indonesian educational context, such as the custom of kissing a teacher's hand as a sign of respect (Destiani et al., 2025), are absent from the textbook visualizations. It indicates that representations of small-c culture in textbooks remain very limited.

This condition is further exacerbated by the absence of small c cultural representations within Arab–Islamic and global cultural contexts. However, small-c culture emphasizes practical cultural knowledge essential for real-life interaction and shapes individuals' lived experiences within it. It is precisely this aspect that makes small c culture crucial for achieving genuine communicative competence and cultural understanding in foreign language learning (Lasekan et al., 2024).

#### *Limited Explicit Cultural Representation*

Based on the findings above, it is evident that almost all forms of cultural representation in the textbooks are presented implicitly, with very few instances of genuinely explicit representation. Even representations of Arab–Islamic and global cultures are not presented in their original cultural contexts but are consistently embedded in the lived realities of Indonesian society. With regard to small c culture, for example, the illustrations are not intended to represent intergender interaction practices within Indonesia's religious cultural context. Instead, they function merely as instructional media to explain specific Arabic grammatical rules, namely changes in verb forms that encode differences in gender and number of participants.

Meanwhile, greeting illustrates a small c aspect, namely, greeting and introduction gestures, that is relatively more explicit because it appears within the context of an introduction lesson. This representation not only depicts nonverbal actions through illustration but also includes verbal utterances in textual form, thereby providing a complete model of social behavior multimodally. Nevertheless, such explicit presentations of culture remain very limited and do not represent the dominant pattern in the textbooks.

The tendency toward the dominance of implicit cultural representation is consistent with the findings of Zhang, Li, Chen, et al. (2024) and Zhang, Li, & Chang (2024), which indicate that language textbooks generally present culture more implicitly than explicitly. However, explicit cultural presentation is crucial, particularly when the goals of language learning are no longer limited to communicative competence but have expanded toward the achievement of intercultural communicative competence (ICC). It is further supported by Huang (2021), who found that explicit culture instruction in language learning is effective in enhancing students' ICC development, especially in the dimensions of knowledge and skills. Moreover, integrating

cultural content into language instruction contributes to improvements in language acquisition and learners' linguistic and communicative competence (Haliq et al., 2025).

Overall, these findings indicate the need for a shift in the approach to language textbook development, from merely presenting culture as an implicit background toward more explicit, authentic, and diverse cultural representations. Such improvements would not only enrich students' understanding of target cultural contexts but also support the development of intercultural competence, a critical requirement in language learning in the global era. Accordingly, updating instructional material design to be more culturally sensitive constitutes a strategic step toward fostering learning that is more inclusive, meaningful, and relevant to the demands of a globalized world.

While these implications are significant, the study remains subject to several limitations. First, the analysis focuses on three textbooks published by a single commercial publisher; therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to all Arabic language textbooks used in Indonesia. Second, the study examines cultural representation at the level of textual and visual construction and does not investigate how teachers or students interpret these representations in classroom practice. Finally, as a corpus-based multimodal analysis, the study prioritizes representational patterns rather than measuring the direct impact of cultural content on learners' intercultural competence. Future research may expand the corpus to include multiple publishers and educational levels, and incorporate classroom-based or reception studies to explore how cultural representations are pedagogically mediated.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that cultural representation in the Arabic language textbooks for Phases D, E, and F of the *Merdeka Curriculum* published by Erlangga remains heavily dominated by local culture, with proportions significantly higher than those of Arab–Islamic or global cultures. This imbalance is also reflected in the disproportionate emphasis on formal, monumental Big C cultural elements rather than on Small c elements that represent everyday cultural practices, with Big C elements overwhelmingly predominant. Both Big C and Small c cultural components are presented only in limited ways and do not adequately capture cultural diversity in a nuanced or contextual manner. Furthermore, the dominance of implicit cultural representation indicates that the textbooks do not yet fully support the comprehensive development of cultural awareness, despite its importance as a foundational dimension in fostering ICC, an essential component of foreign language learning in the global era.

These findings underscore the need for textbooks to be designed with greater sensitivity to cultural diversity and to incorporate cultural representations that are more explicit, authentic, and proportionally balanced across local, Arab–Islamic, and global cultures. It is also essential to strengthen the representation of Small c elements, particularly everyday Arab social practices and global cultural patterns relevant to real-world intercultural communication. Such revisions would not only enrich students' learning experiences but also reinforce the development of cultural awareness necessary for fostering ICC.

In future investigations, the scope of analysis should be broadened to include a broader range of publishers and educational levels, and MDA should be combined with empirical data such as classroom observations or teacher interviews. Such triangulation would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how learners interpret and internalise cultural representations in textbooks. This approach is expected to make more substantial contributions to the development of inclusive, contextually grounded, and interculturally oriented instructional materials.

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**INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT**

Participation in this study was voluntary. All participants were informed about the purpose, procedures, possible risks, and benefits of the research. They were assured that their identities would remain confidential and that the information provided would be used only for research purposes. Participants also had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before their involvement in the study.

**DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT**

The data supporting this study are not publicly available in order to protect participant privacy and maintain ethical standards. However, the data may be made available by the authors upon reasonable request and with approval from the appropriate institutional ethics review board, provided that the proposed use is consistent with ethical guidelines and participant consent.

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