

WESTERN CEFR ADVANCED ESL TEXTBOOKS IN ISLAMIC MALAYSIAN HIGHER LEARNING INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Since the official implementation of The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR: an international standard for describing language aptitude) in Malaysian schools in 2018, Malaysian higher learning institutions too; have CEFR aligned their English language learning curriculum. In the process of adapting to the CEFR system, the Malaysian education institutions have employed CEFR endorsed English language learning textbooks issued by western established publishers. Aligning the Malaysian context English language learning syllabus to the CEFR scales is significant to meet the globalised community standards. However, issues of intercultural norms and intercultural pragmatics should be notably considered in the provided language learning materials. This concern is furthermore complicated in the Malaysian Islamic context that has certain restrictions opposing the customs of the western culture and society. To explore this issue, this paper aims to analyse western published CEFR English language textbooks for advanced learners. The research analysed western published CEFR certified textbooks for tertiary level learners (CEFR level A2, B1+, B2). The analysis focused on topics of discussion, linguistic communicative explications, and graphic representations. The findings illustrate that the analysed textbooks predominantly represent the use of communicative language in the western context and represent the worldview of westerners in general.

Kata Kunci : *CEFR, English as a Second Language for Advanced Learners, Learning Materials, Islamic Malaysian Higher Learning Institutions*

CEFR English In the Islamic Malaysian Tertiary Education Context

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) was recommended in 2001 by the European Union Council Resolution to particularly assess language ability. This framework was introduced in Europe with the objective to oversee language education and the process of citizenship application in European states (“Common European Framework of Reference for Languages,” 2018). Malaysian schools have adapted this CEFR framework in the English as a Second Language (ESL) curriculum landscape in 2018. In aligning to this execution,

Malaysian higher learning institutions have also adjusted the related ESL prospectus in synchronising the edification chronology implemented in the Malaysian education system. The similar adjustment has also without exception been implemented in Islamic Malaysian higher learning institutions. Regarding this implementation, one of the arising issues is in terms of the ESL learning materials that comply with the CEFR aligned scales. The existing ESL learning materials that have been published in-house by certain Malaysian higher learning institutions are not totally aligned to the CEFR framework. In particular, the Malaysian education context has yet to publish local ESL CEFR aligned textbooks that fit the Malaysian or the South East Asian context.

Integrating CEFR Global Scales Based Language Teaching and The Islamic Context

The idea of integrating language learning and culture is important in not only language proficiency, but also in language performance. In relation to this, recent studies have explored the incorporation of culture exposure in English language teaching (ELT) materials. A study exploring cultural presentations in international English teaching textbooks claimed that the discussions of culture are not adequate to make the learners reflect the cultures because the presentations are mostly based on traditional knowledge (Shin et al., 2011). Besides that, the findings of a study on national English as a foreign language textbook for senior high school students in Indonesia implicated that multicultural elements from other countries are required to be included in English language teaching textbooks (Setyono & Widodo, 2019). It is important to also take into consideration of non-native English language teachers' perspective in incorporating cultural elements represented in English language teaching textbooks. Local Thai teachers reported to have experienced anxiety and resistance in approaching global English as Foreign Language (EFL) textbooks that were misleading in cultural assumptions (Forman, 2014). However, McConachy's study on an English language classroom in Japan claimed that there is potential for students to expand their intercultural competencies even with the imperfections of cultural representations offered in language textbooks (McConachy, 2018). Song in 2013, suggested that American English and culture dominated representations in Korean EFL textbooks should be deconstructed to evade the reproductions of social inequalities regarding gender, race, and nationality in the learners' worldview (Song, 2013). In the context of the Iranian ELT materials, Tajeddin and Teimournezhad mentioned that the international textbooks provided more target language cultural representations compared to the local textbooks which were neutral and not referring to any specific culture. The study highlighted that learners in an intercultural language learning classroom context should be exposed to not just a single culture, since English is an international language (Tajeddin & Teimournezhad, 2015).

On the other hand, in Malaysia, the importance of integrating cultural elements in language learning is undeniable, but it does not implicate that in order to achieve proficiency in English, the ESL learners in Malaysia have to rely on all the materials and contexts of the west. In order to teach English language competency, English language teachers should not just focus solely on the cultures of the United States and Great Britain (Nault, 2006). It is important to note that we are adapting only the CEFR language ability scales, not the European and western lifestyle or worldview. Besides, the Malaysian education system prior to the CEFR implementation; already has had most elements present in the CEFR language ability scale. The existing components are not something new to the ESL teachers, the constituents just need to be realigned and adjusted to the CEFR scale. In other words, it does not mean that it is a must to use imported western CEFR

ESL books to achieve the target language proficiency. Thus, it is important to relate this to Kramsch's argument (Kramsch, 1995), in which it raises the question on whether the teaching materials should accentuate the similarities or put emphasis on the differences between the native and the target language culture. This is required so that teachers can develop strategically in approaching non-native speakers to relate to native speakers' norms of language use linguistically and culturally without having to jeopardise sensitive socio-cultural norms of the language learners. It is also worthwhile to mention that in this global internet era, it does not mean that it is impossible for learners to be proficient in performing the target language linguistically and pragmatically if their learning materials are not totally from the west.

It is unquestionable that western published CEFR certified ESL textbooks provide wide-ranging and comprehensive teaching and learning materials. Besides, the content of learning materials has been tailored to the requirements set in the CEFR scales. However, we cannot oversimplify the western influenced content to be perfectly assimilated to the whole world in general. This matter is especially crucial to be addressed in the context of sensitive social elements associated to faith and religion. Hence, this paper aims to discuss the arising issues related to western published CEFR certified textbooks for tertiary level learners specifically in the context of Islamic higher learning institution.

Methodology of The Study

The research analysed 3 CEFR English textbooks published by publishers from the United Kingdom. The data of analysis consist of CEFR A2 Personal Best A2 ELEMENTARY published in 2017 (Rogers, 2017); CEFR B1+ Personal Best B1+ INTERMEDIATE published in 2017 (Scrivener & Burton, 2017); and CEFR B2 Personal Best B2 UPPER INTERMEDIATE published in 2019 (Barros, 2019). The scope of the analysis specifically focused on the topics of discussion, content of the reading passages, activities, graphics, and audio-visually provided in the textbooks. The researchers also have used the analysed textbooks in teaching sessions to tertiary level students in an Islamic higher learning institution in Malaysia for at least within 7 months of time frame. This Malaysian Islamic higher learning institution has set regulations and practices which align to the general Islamic teachings. The researchers are also practicing Muslims. This aspect is highlighted to relate to any relevant analysis from the perspective of a Muslim.

The analysis of the textbooks adapted Fairclough's approach in analysing discourse for social studies (Fairclough, 2003). Fairclough highlighted that textual analysis (micro-level) independently is inadequate, for this reason, the analysis also integrates discourse (meso-level) and social (macro-level) context. In this research, Fairclough's micro; meso; and macro level interpretations have been specifically detailed into interrelating the western published CEFR textbooks to the context of the Malaysian Muslim ESL learners in an Islamic higher learning institution. The micro; meso; and macro level interpretations (refer to Table 1) aimed to map the three forms of analysis onto one another.

Analysis Level	Details of Analysis
Micro (textual analysis)	Linguistic analysis of the western published CEFR textbooks
Meso (discourse practice analysis)	Analysis of the processes of the production, distribution and consumption of the western published CEFR textbooks
Macro (intertextual and interdiscursive analysis)	Analysis of societal issues related to the Malaysian Islamic context affected by/affecting the western published CEFR textbooks

Table 1: Micro, meso, and macro level interpretations

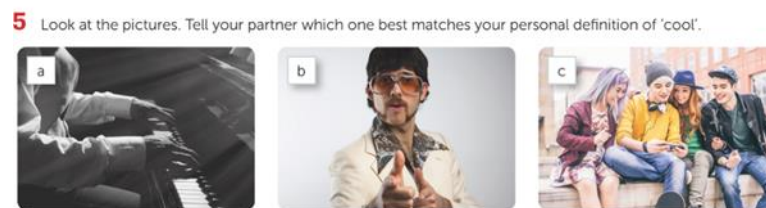
Issues to Be Addressed in Western Published ESL Textbooks

At the micro-level, the analysis of textbooks reflects that each of them is aligned with the global CEFR scale in terms of the language abilities targeted to the textbook users. The vocabulary and words introduced in the textbooks are within the CEFR A2, B1 and B2 level. The syntax introduced is also at the level where learners may be able to comprehend spontaneous situations, general familiar matters, as well as concrete and abstract topics. Meanwhile, at the meso level, the variations of major topics explored in the analysed textbooks are on communication; the society; living and lifestyle; work and education; entertainment and leisure; sports and health; psychology; culture; ethics; and environment. In addition, the western published ESL textbooks are targeted to elementary, intermediate, and upper intermediate level ESL students. At the macro level, in which the study is focusing on, the fact that the textbooks were developed by writers who are westerners, their depictions of the topics explored are from their western secular perspective and on top of that, the users of the textbooks in this research are Malaysian ESL language instructors and Malaysian ESL learners in a Malaysian Islamic higher learning institution. Thus, from this macro-level analysis, the conflict between the western and Islamic perspectives depicted in certain elements in the ESL textbooks are discussed in detail.

Throughout the content of the textbooks analysed, depictions of the western millennial way of life are presented within the topics explored. This is evident in the instances of communication context provided especially in verbal communication where physical appearance and distance are involved. In the Islamic way of life, there is the notion of Mahram and non-Mahram between different genders. A Mahram refers to someone of the opposite gender who is related to an individual either because of biological relationship, breastfeeding ties, and marriage ties. Islam sets specific restrictions in what a Mahram and a non-Mahram may or may not do. A non-Mahram, for example, cannot mingle freely with another person of the opposite gender like a married couple. In Islam, it is considered a transgression, therefore, this leads to a major conflict of perspectives between the western published ESL textbooks and the Islamic worldview. In the current western context, the issue of different genders mingling freely seems to be normal and nothing substantial, but it is not the case for the Muslims. Unrestricted socialising manners are serious issues within the Islamic norms. Islam regards this matter as related to the social constitution at large. For the

Muslims, if such matter is not addressed appropriately according to the teachings of the Quran and Prophet Muhammad, it will disrupt the harmony of the social constitution.

According to the data, representations of the non-Islamic actions are present in the portrayals of the physical contact of the non-Mahram young men and women depicted in the analysed textbooks. The graphics and pictures in the analysed textbooks, for instance, on page 28 and page 138 of Personal Best B1+ depict a young man and a young woman holding hands. Next, the depiction of a young man and a young woman sitting close watching a movie together is evident in Personal Best B2 on page 18 and in Personal Best A2 on page 104. Other representations of non-Mahram men and women sitting very close together are found in Personal Best B2 on page 52 and page 99. Moreover, in Personal Best B2 on page 7 as in Graphic 1, an activity in defining the learner's description of being 'cool' shows a picture of non-Mahram youngsters sitting close together looking at a gadget. This could imply that indirectly the learners are being brainwashed to accept that freely mingling together in that particular way is a part of being cool among youngsters. These actions are normal for the western non-Muslim culture, but not for the Islamic community. Thus, this becomes a problem for the ESL teachers and ESL learners in an Islamic institution. This is so, because such nonconformity actions are reprovved in such particular Islamic learning institution.



Graphic 1: Excerpt of Personal Best B2, page 7

Another conflict of culture representation portrayed in the analysed ESL textbooks is the western dating culture which is non-Islamic. In Personal Best A2 on page 26 (refer to Graphic 2), a subtopic discussing on 'opposites attract' tells about a couple, Chris and Cara, who are in a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship. It is mentioned in the reading text that Cara likes to spend a quiet evening with her boyfriend at home. Another instance representing this boyfriend-girlfriend relationship is present in Personal Best A2 on page 82, where a picture depicts the situation: I'm having a problem with my boyfriend/ girlfriend. In Personal Best A2 on page 84 (refer to Graphic 3), the subtopic 'First Dates' talks about where not to go on a first date. In Personal Best B2 on pages 8 and page 9, an activity requires the learners to read and understand a forum discussing a dating experience. This normal western kind of dating culture without marriage ties is totally extremely against the Islamic teachings. Should any of the individuals at the Islamic higher learning institution of this particular research do this, it will lead to disciplinary actions and dismissal from the institution.

OPPOSITES attract

CARA
My boyfriend Chris and I are very different. He's always out and he loves doing sport. He likes running and he loves playing tennis. I don't mind tennis, but I hate running! I like different activities: I enjoy doing yoga in the park and I love reading. But I think we're a great couple. Why? We both like living in the city. We enjoy good restaurants and we love meeting our friends at the weekend, but I sometimes prefer to spend a quiet evening with him at home.

CHRIS
I think it's great that Cara and I have our own interests. I enjoy being active: I play tennis and go running every day. Cara enjoys relaxing at home and she loves visiting museums and galleries. I don't mind visiting museums, but I hate art! We do some things together – we both love going bowling, for example, but I don't want a girlfriend who's just like me. They say 'opposites attract' and I agree!

Graphic 2: Excerpt of Personal Best A2, page 26

3 Read the text. Which three places are a bad idea for a first date? Which three places are a good idea?

Where NOT to go on a first date

You have a date with someone special and you don't know where to go. Don't make the mistake of choosing the wrong place. **Here are three places not to go!**

1 The cinema
Do you want to sit in a dark room in silence during your first date? No! Then don't go to the cinema! How about going to the park instead? Nothing is more important than conversation on a first date and a walk in the park gives you lots of time to talk and have fun together. It's more romantic than the cinema and it's also cheaper. In fact, it's free!

2 A nightclub
Music, dancing, beautiful people ... a date at a club sounds great! Or maybe not. It's impossible to chat and a lot of people don't feel comfortable on a crowded dance floor. Why not go bowling? A bowling alley is quieter and more relaxed than a nightclub, and it's cheaper!

3 An expensive restaurant
It's a popular first date, but a meal in an expensive restaurant is often a bad idea. It can be hard to relax and be yourself in a restaurant, especially if it's quite quiet. It's better to meet in a café for a coffee or lunch. It's more comfortable than a restaurant and, if things aren't going well, it's also easier to escape!


Our final piece of advice: don't be late. There's nothing worse than a late date!

Graphic 3: Excerpt of Personal Best A2, page 84

Subsequently, another issue of western and Islamic culture divergence is pertaining to the norms of socialising and building relationships. The western culture of socialising involves people to hangout, to mingle around, to party, to meet other people, to go out, and to mix around without specific barriers in order to get to know people and make friendship. In the Islamic practice, there are certain guidelines set by the Shariah (Islamic law) in the act of socialising. A specific associated instance of non-Mahram men and women going out together against the Islamic concession found in the analysed ESL textbooks is in Personal Best A2 on page 28 where a subtopic shows two guys and two ladies planning a night out together. In Personal Best A2 on page 46, a similar non-Islamic norm is also present where an example of a short conversation between two men and a woman go out shopping for clothing together. Another related conflict of western and Islamic norm is found in Personal Best A2 on page 133, where a learning material elaborates the experience of non-Mahram young men and women going out for a holiday together. In Personal Best B1+ on page 11 (refer to Graphic 4), a speaking lesson on making small talk shows a video clip of conversation between a young man and a young woman who meet for the first time. They are both at their friend's apartment for a party. In their conversation, the woman wants to get to know more about the guy and seems to be a little flirty in manner. In the context of the video, other non-Mahram individuals are also seen in the background. If this situation and circumstance were to be reproduced by the Malaysian Muslim ESL learners of this research, then they will be reprimanded by their learning institution or worst by the Islamic authorities for having such a party involving non-Mahram individuals getting together in an apprehensive manner.

5 **1.10** Watch or listen to the second part of the show. Ethan goes to a party and meets Cindy for the first time. Tick (✓) the topics that Cindy and Ethan talk about.

- 1 Penny and Taylor's apartment
- 2 their families
- 3 their jobs
- 4 how they know Penny and Taylor
- 5 the food at the party
- 6 the weather



6 **1.10** Put the sentences (a–i) in order. Watch or listen again and check.

- a Cindy So, what do you do on your webshow?
- b Ethan Oh, you met at work! So, are you having a good time?
- c Cindy Sorry, I don't know Penny that well. By the way, I'm Cindy. I work with Taylor at the gym.
- d Ethan Well, I'm a presenter, a co-host, like Penny.
- e Cindy How do you know Penny and Taylor?
- f Ethan Mmm! Well, I love carrot cake.
- g Cindy It's a great party. I got here early so I could bring my famous carrot cake.
- h Ethan I'm Ethan. I work with Penny on Learning Curve. It's a webshow. We're presenters.
- i Cindy Hmm, a presenter, that's interesting. And what does that involve?

Graphic 4: Excerpt of Personal Best B1+, page 11

An absolute conflict of norms between the western non-Muslim community and the Malaysian Islamic context portrayed in the analysed discourse is the practice of non-Mahram individuals who are cohabiting together. This cohabiting practice is reflected throughout the Personal Best B2 textbook. In Personal Best B2, the speaking lessons elaborate the conversations between roommates: Ben and Abigail, a young man and a young woman, who are renting an apartment together. The excerpts are present in audio-visual form in Personal Best B2 on page 18; page 36; page 37; page 54; page 55; page 72; page 73; page 90; page 91; page 108; and page 109. The subtopic 'A suitable roommate' on page 54 and page 55 makes it more critical (refer to Graphic 5), when the discussion is about taking another man as a new roommate renting the apartment. This subtopic is obviously a direct portrayal of a non-Islamic practice. Ben and Abigail are noticeably millennials around the same age range as the Malaysian Muslim ESL students in this research. In the Islamic context, this practice of non-Mahram individuals who are not married living together is clearly forbidden.

6D A suitable roommate

1 In pairs, choose the three most important characteristics of a flatmate or roommate. Use the ideas in the box.

fun, honest, organized, quiet, responsible, the same age, the same values

2 Watch or listen to the first part of 'Talking Zone'. Write Ben or Abigail.



3 Match the two parts to make complete sentences from Ben and Abigail's conversation.

4 Read the Conversation builder. Imagine you and your partner are looking for a flatmate. Tick turns challenging the assumptions below.

5 Watch or listen to the second part of the show. What do Ben and Abigail agree on?

6 Read the Skill box. Guess the missing words in Ben and Abigail's sentences below. Then watch or listen again and check.

7 Which problem-solving strategy does each sentence in exercise 6 use?

8 **PREPARE** In pairs, imagine you belong to the same family. You need to solve a problem together. Prepare a conversation, using one of the ideas below.

9 **PRACTISE** Practise the conversation. Make sure you make suggestions and offer/talk for clarification. Were you able to solve your problem?

10 **PERSONALISE** Choose a new problem and practise the conversation again. Did you suggest practical solutions? What improvements can you make?

Teaching notes

Personal Best Write a research headline a problem you or someone you know has had. Include how it was solved.

Graphic 5: Excerpt of Personal Best B2, page 54 and page 55

Other western customs that are common in the non-Islamic context that are represented in the analysed ESL learning materials are the nightlife culture and the lottery norms. In Personal Best B1+ on page 36, an email of an individual mentions that she enjoys the nightlife at the place that she is visiting. This nightlife culture of having fun is normal for the non-Muslim western culture, but in the Islamic sense, it is usually associated to something immoral. The Malaysian Muslim ESL learners are expected not to practice such behaviours. In the particular learning institution of this research, students are expected to not be outside of campus during curfew hours. Apart from that, in Personal Best B1+ on page 135, a positive portrayal is shown of a person who has won a lottery. In the Islamic perspective, lottery is a form of gambling. All kinds of gambling are strictly prohibited and considered a major sin according to the Islamic teachings. This prohibition has been clearly mentioned in the Quran and Prophet Muhammad's tradition. As it is well known that the Quran and Prophet Muhammad's traditions are the main holy sources of Islamic belief, the positive portrayal of winning a lottery is against the general foundation of belief of the Malaysian Muslim ESL learners.

Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that conflicting non-Islamic portrayals of the western culture are evident in the analysed western published ESL textbooks. The clash of custom perspectives is not a trivial matter in the context of an Islamic based institution where Islamic teachings and Islamic practices are highly promoted. The non-Islamic portrayals could actually be substituted with other alternatives which are neutral and non-sensitive towards any party. In consequence, the ESL teaching materials should have examples of roommates of the same gender instead of the opposite gender and demonstrate social activities that do not create confusion of such deviant behaviours. It is noted that it is not impossible to still communicate proficiently in English and even learn the target language culture without having to have physical contact to a non-Mahram or any circumstances that involve different genders mingling together.

In this globalisation in the digital age, it is indisputable that intercultural norms may be explored easily, and they are exposed via many platforms. These platforms may be more effective compared to the ESL textbooks. Thus, it is best to highlight the importance of the target audience of the ESL learning materials. If the target is those who are living in the western context or who are planning to migrate and assimilate to the western community, then the ESL textbook writers are on the exact objective. However, if the objective is to indirectly change the perspective of the ESL learners to favour the western way of life, then this may eventually become a threat especially for the Islamic community.

To conclude, ESL textbook writers should utilise and explore more on matters that are not sensitive to any culture or belief. If being secular and non-spiritual is the rationale of the western ESL textbook publishers in exploring the non-Islamic customs, then ESL learning materials that are neutral of those elements are significantly required. Because language learning also integrates culture, it is important to be selective of the cultural representations in the ESL learning materials. In developing language learning materials, it is important to make sure that the teachers and learners understand that it is the language proficiency and language performance that are to be acquired, not the whole aspect of the target language culture.

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