

DECOLONISING THE ESL/EFL CLASSROOM: TEXTBOOK CONTENT, NATIONAL IDENTITY, AND THE MALAYSIA MADANI

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Abstract

Traditionally, English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbook have been perceived as neutral linguistic tools. However, they frequently reproduce the cultural norms and hegemonic ideologies of dominant English-speaking nations, particularly those from inner-circle countries. Such representations risk marginalising local voices, undermining cultural authenticity, and alienating learners from their lived experiences. Drawing on studies of ESL/EFL textbook analysis from Southeast Asia and the Middle East, this paper identifies four recurring educational themes that shape textbook design: cultural representation, moral and ethical values, intercultural competence, and inclusivity and equity. Positioned within the Malaysian context, the paper argues for the decolonisation of the ESL/EFL classroom through a critical evaluation of textbook content and its alignment with the principles of Malaysia Madani. Accordingly, the four key themes are mapped onto the six core values of Malaysia Madani (Sustainability, Well-being, Creativity, Respect, Confidence, and Compassion) offering a culturally grounded and future-oriented framework for textbook development. Integrating these values into language materials allows Malaysian ESL/EFL textbooks to move beyond Eurocentric narratives and foster ethical awareness, cultural understanding, and civic responsibility. Such an approach not only enhances learners' linguistic competence but also nurtures socially conscious individuals who are deeply rooted in their national identity. The paper concludes by calling for textbook reform and policy transformation that reflect Malaysia's multicultural ethos and developmental aspirations, positioning language education as a vehicle for both linguistic empowerment and nation-building.

Keywords: ESL/EFL textbooks; decolonisation of language education; Malaysia Madani; moral and ethical values; nation-building

ESL/EFL textbooks play several essential roles in language instruction, which can generally be grouped into three main categories: educational, language-focused, and motivational functions. In their educational capacity, ESL/EFL textbooks fulfil several key functions; they offer instructional guidance that aligns with the nation's educational standards (Amiri & Rezvani, 2021), they provide teacher support through clearly organized content and activities (Erkir & Alkhaldi, 2025) and they are also embedded with assessment tools (Zulfa & Ratri, 2022). Linguistically, ESL/EFL textbooks play crucial roles in vocabulary development (Jandhyala et al., 2025; Van Vu & Michel, 2021), grammar instruction (Williams, 2010) and language skills integration (Amiri & Rezvani, 2021; Erkir & Alkhaldi, 2025). While in terms of motivational functions, ESL/EFL textbooks play a significant role in fostering learner engagement and sustaining interest in language learning (Bhutto & Kazmi, 2024). Many textbooks include interactive tasks that are specifically designed to build learners' confidence in using the language in real-life contexts (Turnbull, 2018; Algazo, 2023) as well as nurture positive emotional and attitudinal responses toward language learning (López, 2023). In short, they play a pivotal role in guiding both teachers and students towards achieving language proficiency.

ESL/EFL textbooks also function as ideological tools, embedding and transmitting various cultural (Banaruee et al., 2023), social (Chapain, 2025), and political ideologies (Dassanayake, 2022). The textbooks frequently embed ideological content that reflects the prevailing cultural and moral values of the societies in which they are produced. These values are conveyed through specific linguistic and rhetorical strategies, which may create tension or ambiguity when engaging with diverse cultural perspectives, thereby highlighting the importance of fostering critical reading and pedagogical awareness (Nizamani & Shah, 2022). Additionally, textbooks often perpetuate hegemonic ideologies by promoting the norms, beliefs, and worldviews of native-speaker contexts, incorporating themes such as nationalism and religion in ways that may influence learners' perceptions (Ulum & Kökksal, 2020). Apart from that, cultural representation in these materials tends to prioritise inner-circle countries, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, while marginalising the cultural narratives of expanding and outer-circle societies, resulting in a skewed portrayal of global cultural diversity (Isnaini et al., 2019; Smith, 2023). Through the integration of dominant cultural norms and hegemonic perspectives, these educational materials play a role in constructing learners' identities and influencing their worldview. This shows that ESL/EFL textbooks are also ideological in nature, serving as instruments that can shape learners' understandings of cultural, social, and political realities.

ESL/EFL textbooks are far more than mere instructional tools. They are multifaceted resources that simultaneously serve pedagogical, linguistic, motivational, and ideological purposes. While they support the development of language skills and learner engagement, they also carry embedded cultural and ideological messages that shape students' perceptions of the world and their place within it. These multiple functions of ESL/EFL textbooks highlight the importance of critically evaluating textbook contents not only for its educational merit but also for its socio-cultural implications.

ANALYSING ESL/EFL TEXTBOOKS: FINDING THE THEMES

Cultural Representation

ESL/EFL textbooks are not neutral linguistic tools. They should reflect the multicultural realities of the societies in which they are used. In a country composed of multiple ethnic groups, religious beliefs, and cultural traditions, it is vital for ESL/EFL textbooks to move beyond predominantly Western cultural representations and include diverse local and regional voices. The materials should promote understanding and respect for different cultures, avoid stereotypes, and encourage students to appreciate cultural plurality. For example, in context such as Malaysia, where cultural diversity is not merely a social characteristic but a defining element of national identity, language materials must therefore represent this plurality in meaningful and authentic ways. Research from neighbouring contexts reveals the importance of such inclusion. For example, Isnaini et al. (2019), through a visual semiotic analysis of an Indonesian vocational high school English textbook, found that multicultural values such as respect for traditions, appreciation of perspectives and cultural products, and recognition of gender equality were effectively communicated through visual elements. These representations enhance students' intercultural communication competence by reinforcing acceptance of racial and religious differences.

Similarly, Setyono & Widodo (2019) critically examined an Indonesian government-endorsed EFL textbook and identified four dominant themes of multiculturalism: respect for ethnic and religious diversity, recognition of indigenous cultures, promotion of peaceful coexistence with nature, and appreciation of creative cultural products. These themes reflect a deliberate attempt to prepare students for global interaction while grounding them in their local identity. Meanwhile, Hasnah et al. (2024) conducted a content analysis of Indonesian locally produced textbooks to examine how local cultural values are represented. Their study found that while the textbooks strongly emphasise cultural products, they give relatively little attention to cultural perspectives²⁶. The findings suggest that incorporating localised content can enhance learner engagement and intercultural literacy. However, the

study also highlights the need for a more balanced representation that includes cultural practices and viewpoints, not just tangible cultural elements.

ESL/EFL textbooks should highlight local cultures and histories to ensure that content remains relatable, meaningful, and accessible to students. In Malaysia, the shift toward the use of CEFR-aligned English language textbooks, particularly those imported from the United Kingdom, has sparked considerable debate among educators and stakeholders. Although these foreign textbooks aim to meet international standards, their lack of local cultural relevance presents significant pedagogical challenges. Ahamat, Widiati and Kabilan (2024) examined Malaysian teachers' experiences with an imported CEFR-aligned textbook and found that teachers rated key aspects such as authenticity and intercultural competence as only "moderate." Many reported that these materials did not reflect the socio-economic backgrounds of Malaysian learners and lacked cultural resonance, requiring teachers to heavily adapt the content to suit local contexts. The disconnection between textbook content and students' lived realities has raised concerns about student engagement and equitable access to learning.

Similarly, Aziz and Makhtar (2021) explored the experiences of in-service TESL teachers who evaluated oral history materials developed by their peers. These educators, as part of a postgraduate course, reflected on the pedagogical value of integrating local history into English language materials. Through their personal reflective journals, participants emphasised the importance of contextually grounded content and proposed new criteria for evaluating materials that give weight to cultural relevance, historical familiarity, and student connection to the text. Their insights suggest that English language materials should not be purely imported but rather be locally developed or adapted to include Malaysian perspectives, stories, and voices. This move would not only support linguistic development but also cultivate a sense of identity and belonging among learners.

The brief review above affirms that embedding local culture and history into ESL/EFL materials is not just a pedagogical preference but a necessity. When students encounter familiar contexts, characters, and narratives in their learning materials, language learning becomes more meaningful and inclusive.

Moral and Ethical Values

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Textbooks are used as a platform to integrate moral values such as responsibility, respect,

and empathy in their contents, which are essential in shaping students into responsible and engaged citizens in a multi-ethnic society (Maulidiah et al., 2023; Muktadir et al., 2025). The integration of moral values into language learning has shown promising outcomes. A study by Puspitasari et al. (2025) focusing on Indonesian primary schools, demonstrated how multimodal EFL projects found in textbooks, such as storytelling, drawing, and collaborative tasks, can simultaneously foster language proficiency and moral development. Values like kindness and responsibility were meaningfully engaged through creative activities, leading to increased student autonomy, empathy, and awareness of social responsibilities. These findings reinforce the idea that language education is not merely about linguistic competence but can serve as a powerful platform for instilling ethical values and nurturing morally conscious learners.

Textbooks also highlight local cultures and histories to make the content more relatable to students, especially in a linguistically and culturally diverse context. When learning materials reflect students lived experiences, social norms, and cultural values, they become more meaningful and accessible. An example can be seen in the Iranian context, where Maleki Jebelli et al. (2024) examined the implementation of locally developed English storybooks for young EFL learners. Recognising that mainstream English course books which are often authored by native speakers, include cultural concepts such as exchange students, host families, and online dating that are not aligned with Iranian values, the researchers created three contemporary storybooks inspired by shared moral themes from classical Persian literature. These storybooks not only preserved cultural authenticity but also addressed a moral dimension relevant to the learners' social upbringing. The study revealed several key opportunities that emerged from integrating local cultural elements into English learning. Among others, young learners showed improvements in English proficiency and demonstrated stronger critical thinking skills, indicating that culturally grounded materials can enhance both linguistic and cognitive development.

Incorporating such culturally resonant content in textbooks can bridge the gap between language learning and students' everyday realities, fostering both academic and personal growth in meaningful ways. Textbooks that integrate values like responsibility, respect, and empathy can help develop students' character, prepare them for real-world challenges, and support the formation of an ethical and cohesive society.

Intercultural Competence

Developing students' intercultural communication skills is essential in preparing them to navigate an increasingly interconnected and culturally diverse world (Zhang et al., 2025;

Xue et al., 2024) ESL/EFL textbooks play a critical role in this process and should therefore include content and activities that foster appreciation for different cultures while encouraging meaningful engagement with cultural diversity. Awaad et al. (2025), in their study on primary EFL textbooks in Egypt, propose a Three-Pronged Model of Analysis that highlights three core dimensions which are cultural representation, intercultural dialogue, and cultural competence. Grounded in the principles of intercultural communicative competence (ICC), the model encourages educators and policymakers to move beyond superficial depictions of culture and adopt a critical pedagogy that challenges cultural assumptions and promotes inclusive thinking. Their evaluation of early-stage EFL textbooks revealed several strengths, including the use of Egyptian-looking characters and positive representations of disability. These are important elements which may foster understanding of diversity.

Jang et al. (2024) analysed Korean Grade 6 EFL textbooks and found notable shortcomings in their ability to promote intercultural competence. Through multimodal content analysis, they observed that English was predominantly portrayed as a language linked to the Western, predominantly White global context, with limited emphasis on interactive, cross-cultural communication. The textbooks often reinforced national pride and a sense of cultural otherness, while failing to present the dynamic intercultural experiences needed to help students imagine themselves as global citizens capable of engaging with diverse communities.

In their critical discourse analysis of a senior high school EFL textbook endorsed by Indonesia's Ministry of Education, Setyono and Widodo (2019) identified four key multicultural themes: respect for ethnic and religious diversity, recognition of indigenous cultures, promotion of harmony and conflict avoidance, and appreciation of creative cultural expressions. These themes, embedded in the textbook, reflect a conscious effort to equip learners for transnational and transcultural communication, where intercultural awareness is essential. The study highlights the importance of moving beyond Anglo-American cultural norms in EFL materials by including content from learners' own cultures as well as from other countries in the outer and expanding circles. This broader representation enables students to engage in global communication with greater cultural sensitivity and mutual respect.

Complementing these findings, Hasnah et al. (2024) explored the representation of local cultural norms in Indonesian-produced EFL textbooks using Yuen's cultural evaluation framework, which includes products, practices,²⁶ perspectives, and persons. Their content analysis showed that while cultural products were widely featured, cultural perspectives

were less emphasized. Nevertheless, the inclusion of local culture played a significant role in enhancing learners' intercultural literacy and engagement. The study found that such localised resources encouraged students to connect personally with the content, making language learning more relevant and meaningful. By integrating cultural narratives, traditions, and values into classroom materials, textbooks can become powerful tools for developing students' intercultural communication skills.

The studies highlight the importance of incorporating diverse cultural representations into ESL/EFL textbooks. To develop intercultural communicative competence, textbooks should not only represent diverse cultural contexts fairly but also incorporate tasks that challenge students to think critically about cultural norms, engage in intercultural dialogue, and reflect on their own identities in relation to others. Intercultural competence can be fostered through the inclusion of multicultural themes, dialogues, and collaborative projects that expose students to diverse cultural perspectives and values. By doing so, students are better equipped to become empathetic, culturally aware, and globally competent individuals. Such an approach not only fosters language proficiency but also equips learners with the cultural sensitivity and communicative skills needed to interact respectfully and effectively in a globalised world.

Inclusivity and Equity

Textbooks should be inclusive, representing diverse backgrounds and ensuring that all students feel seen, valued, and respected (Akintayo et al., 2024). This includes avoiding cultural or gender biases, eliminating stereotypes, and ensuring the fair representation of different ethnicities, genders, and social groups. Research from multiple contexts highlights the need for ESL/EFL materials to reflect the identities and realities of diverse learners, promoting equity and fostering intercultural understanding. For instance, in Thailand, EFL university instructors navigating inclusive education policies emphasised the importance of empathy, flexibility, and proactive communication to address student diversity, particularly those with special educational needs. These instructors balanced multiple roles to support inclusivity and highlighted the role of differentiated instruction and on-going support to ensure equitable learning environments (Attachoo & Imsa-Ard, 2024). Meanwhile, in Turkey, Türkmen & Topkaya (2024) who conducted an analysis of secondary school EFL course books found a disproportionate emphasis on white, Western characters and cultural content, with minimal racial diversity. This skewed representation risks reinforcing Eurocentric worldviews and underrepresents learners' own cultural backgrounds. The researchers advocate for revised materials that better reflect global diversity and promote inclusivity. A study by Yoon and Murtaugh (2024) also found that South Korean EFL textbooks still exhibit

Eurocentric biases, featuring Western cultures and white individuals as central figures while marginalising non-Western voices. This suggests that while global content may be included, equitable cultural representation is lacking.

The issue of representation is also tied to sociocultural identity. Javadi and Tahmasbi (2020) argue that textbooks should not merely serve as pedagogical tools but also as cultural texts that convey ideological messages. They call for culturally sensitive materials that align with learners' social identities and emphasize equal representation in terms of ethnicity, race, and gender. Likewise, Sinaga, Putrawan and Nurdiana (2020) highlight gender stereotypes in Indonesian high school EFL textbooks, noting portrayals of women as caring and domestic while men are shown as dominant and brave. Although women are increasingly shown in intellectual roles, traditional gender ideologies persist. The findings emphasise the need for textbook writers and educators to design content that accurately and respectfully represents all learners, thus supporting genuine diversity, inclusion, and intercultural competence in ESL/EFL classrooms.

The convergence of the four themes explored in this review; cultural representation, moral and ethical values, intercultural competence, and inclusivity and equity, reveals that ESL/EFL textbooks are far more than instructional resources; they are influential socialising tools that shape learners' worldviews, identities, and ethical orientations. When thoughtfully designed, textbooks can transcend their traditional linguistic purpose by creating pedagogical spaces where language learning is interwoven with cultural understanding, moral reasoning, and social justice awareness. Integrating culturally authentic content that reflects both global diversity and local realities not only validates learners' identities but also positions English as a bridge rather than a barrier between cultures. Embedding ethical dimensions and moral narratives further enriches this process by fostering critical reflection, empathy, and responsible decision-making. These are competencies essential for navigating today's complex, interconnected world. At the same time, purposeful representation of diverse voices and equitable portrayals of gender, ethnicity, and social class challenge stereotypes and contribute to more inclusive classroom discourses. Together, these dimensions point to a transformative vision of language education: one that equips learners with communicative competence while nurturing them as culturally responsive, ethically grounded, and socially conscious global citizens.

Potential Application of Malaysia Madani Values for ESL/EFL Textbook Analysis

The synthesis of the four thematic strands; cultural representation, moral and ethical values, intercultural competence, and inclusivity and equity, highlights not only the multidimensional nature of textbook content but also the diversity of methodological approaches and analytical frameworks that scholars employ to interrogate it. Discourse analysis, for instance, has been widely used to uncover underlying ideologies, cultural narratives, and power relations embedded in texts, revealing how certain worldviews are normalised while others are marginalised. Content analysis and coding schemes have enabled systematic examinations of moral and ethical themes, allowing researchers to trace the presence, frequency, and framing of values such as respect, fairness, and social responsibility. Critical discourse and postcolonial frameworks have further deepened these inquiries by situating textbook content within broader socio-political contexts, exposing patterns of Eurocentrism, cultural essentialism, and inequitable representation. Meanwhile, intercultural communicative competence models and social justice-oriented frameworks have been instrumental in evaluating how well materials prepare learners to engage critically and empathetically across cultural boundaries. Together, these varied approaches demonstrate that textbook analysis benefits from methodological pluralism in which each framework reveals different layers of meaning and contributes to a more holistic understanding of how language materials shape learners' knowledge, attitudes, and identities.

While the brief reviews above do not utilise the Malaysia Madani core values as their analytical framework, we argue that the themes of cultural representation, moral and ethical values, intercultural competence, and inclusivity and equity illustrated in the findings can be mapped to the values of Malaysia Madani. And with that, the Malaysia Madani core values can be used as an analytical framework to analyse textbooks. Malaysia Madani is built upon six core values, namely sustainability, well-being, creativity, respect, confidence, and courtesy which collectively aim to shape a balanced, ethical, and unified Malaysian society. These values are not merely abstract ideals but are positioned as essential tools to strengthen racial unity, promote socio-economic stability, and nurture holistic human development (<https://malaysiamadani.gov.my/>). The mapping of the four themes (Cultural Representation, Moral and Ethical Values, Intercultural Competence, and Inclusivity and Equity) to the six Malaysia Madani core values is illustrated in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Educational Values vs. Malaysia Madani Core Values

Education al value	Cultural Representatio n	Moral and Ethical Values	Intercultural Competence	Inclusivity and Equity
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Malaysia Madani Core Values	<p>Respect (Hormat): Emphasising the representation of diverse cultural traditions in textbooks aligns with the value of honouring cultural heritage, embracing diversity, and promoting understanding across worldviews.</p>	<p>Compassion (Ihsan): Encouraging empathy, care, and moral responsibility reflects the value of uplifting humanity through ethical actions and character education.</p>	<p>Respect (Hormat): Intercultural competence requires respectful engagement with diverse perspectives and traditions.</p>	<p>Compassion (Ihsan): Ensuring that education is inclusive demonstrates care for all learners and a commitment to fairness and empowerment.</p>
	<p>Well-being (Kesejahteraan): Acknowledging different cultures contributes to social cohesion and psychological well-being by ensuring all learners feel seen and valued.</p>	<p>Confidence (Keyakinan): Building integrity and moral reasoning in students fosters trust in themselves and in their ability to contribute to the common good.</p>	<p>Well-being (Kesejahteraan): It enhances social well-being by equipping learners to navigate multicultural environments harmoniously.</p>	<p>Creativity (Daya Cipta): Inclusive practices recognise diverse talents and foster innovation by encouraging the participation of all learners.</p>
	<p>Sustainability (Kemampanan): Promoting local cultural identity and wisdom supports sustainable nation-building rooted in Malaysian values.</p>	<p>Sustainability (Kemampanan): Instilling ethical values supports a balanced life rooted in long-term thinking and societal stability.</p>	<p>Confidence (Keyakinan): Navigating cross-cultural interactions confidently reflects a sense of integrity and trust in others.</p>	<p>Well-being (Kesejahteraan): Equity in education promotes social justice, contributing to a more balanced and harmonious society.</p>

1. Cultural Representation

Mapped to:

Respect (*Hormat*): Emphasising the representation of diverse cultural traditions in textbooks aligns with the value of honouring cultural heritage, embracing diversity, and promoting understanding across worldviews.

Well-being (*Kesejahteraan*): Acknowledging different cultures contributes to social cohesion and psychological well-being by ensuring all learners feel seen and valued.

Sustainability (*Kemampuan*): Promoting local cultural identity and wisdom supports sustainable nation-building rooted in Malaysian values.

2. Moral and Ethical Values

Mapped to:

Compassion (*Ihsan*): Encouraging empathy, care, and moral responsibility reflects the value of uplifting humanity through ethical actions and character education.

Confidence (*Keyakinan*): Building integrity and moral reasoning in students fosters trust in themselves and in their ability to contribute to the common good.

Sustainability (*Kemampuan*): Instilling ethical values supports a balanced life rooted in long-term thinking and societal stability.

3. Intercultural Competence

Mapped to:

Respect (*Hormat*): Intercultural competence requires respectful engagement with diverse perspectives and traditions.

Well-being (*Kesejahteraan*): It enhances social well-being by equipping learners to navigate multicultural environments harmoniously.

Confidence (*Keyakinan*): Navigating cross-cultural interactions confidently reflects a sense of integrity and trust in others.

4. Inclusivity and Equity

Mapped to:

Compassion (*Ihsan*): Ensuring that education is inclusive demonstrates care for all learners and a commitment to fairness and empowerment.

Creativity (*Daya Cipta*): Inclusive practices recognise diverse talents and foster innovation by encouraging the participation of all learners.

Well-being (*Kesejahteraan*): Equity in education promotes social justice, contributing to a more balanced and harmonious society.

The mapping of Malaysia Madani's six core values to the four themes of cultural representation, moral and ethical values, intercultural competence, and inclusivity and equity underscores the potential of this framework for ESL/EFL textbook analysis. Each principle; sustainability, well-being, creativity, respect, confidence, and compassion, finds meaningful resonance in the way textbooks can shape learners' social, cultural, and moral development. For instance, respect, well-being, and sustainability strengthen cultural representation by validating diverse traditions while anchoring them within local values. Similarly, compassion, confidence, and sustainability provide a foundation for moral and ethical reasoning, fostering learners' integrity and social responsibility. Intercultural competence reflects the integration of respect, well-being, and confidence, equipping students to navigate diversity with empathy and assurance. Finally, inclusivity and equity embody compassion, creativity, and well-being by ensuring education is just, empowering, and conducive to collective harmony. The mapping of the four themes with the broader goals of the Malaysia Madani core values, suggests that they could indeed be applied to enhance the analysis and development of ESL/EFL educational materials.

Taken together, these alignments highlight how Malaysia Madani is not only a socio-political vision but also a practical analytical lens for educational research. When applied to analyse ESL/EFL materials, the framework enables a more holistic evaluation that goes beyond linguistic concerns to address broader issues of ethics, diversity, and social cohesion. This approach has the potential to enrich textbook development and classroom practice, ensuring that language education contributes meaningfully to the cultivation of balanced individuals and a more unified society.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, ESL/EFL textbooks function not merely as tools for linguistic development, but as influential socio-cultural instruments that play a crucial role in shaping students' perspectives, values, and identities. Their contents often carry implicit messages about culture, ethics, and social norms, making it essential to critically examine the values they promote.

For our Malaysian context, we propose analysing ESL/EFL materials through the lens of Malaysia Madani core values as it offers a meaningful framework for evaluating the extent to which textbooks support a value-based education that reflects the nation's aspirations. This framework emphasises core principles such as cultural diversity, moral and ethical awareness,

intercultural competence, inclusivity, and social equity. By embedding these values in textbook content, ESL/EFL textbooks can contribute significantly to the holistic development of students, not only as competent language users, but also as respectful, empathetic, and socially responsible members of a multicultural society.

Additionally, this value-oriented approach aligns with the broader goals of Malaysia Madani, which seeks to foster national unity, social cohesion, and sustainable socio-economic development while nurturing personal growth and civic responsibility. As such, the integration of Malaysia Madani core values into language education can serve as a catalyst for transformative learning experiences that extend beyond the classroom. For educators and policymakers, the Malaysia Madani lens presents an opportunity to reimagine textbook design and curriculum planning in ways that not only enhance language proficiency but also promote ethical consciousness and intercultural understanding and more importantly, uphold the aspiration of the country. Ultimately, ensuring that ESL/EFL textbooks are reflective of Malaysia's pluralistic identity and developmental vision is essential for cultivating a generation of learners who are not only linguistically capable, but also morally grounded and globally competent.

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