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From Cultural Norms to Pluricultural Relationality: A Comparative Discourse Analysis of Foreign-Language Textbooks in Higher Education

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Abstract

Foreign-language textbooks are usually treated as neutral carriers of cultural information. This article argues they are better understood as discursive artifacts that construct what counts as normal, appropriate, or typical within a cultural community, with direct implications for how universities design foreign-language curricula. Using comparative critical discourse analysis of two textbooks used in tertiary language programmes, Sahabatku Indonesia BIPA 1 (Indonesian for foreign speakers) and Tanoshiku Yomou I (a Japanese reading-comprehension textbook), the study asks not what culture is represented but how cultural norms are built discursively, how learners and cultural others are positioned relative to them, and whether either text moves beyond normative representation toward what the article calls pluricultural relationality. Applying a five-level coding framework to 63 purposively sampled segments, the analysis finds both textbooks concentrated at normative and contextualized levels, with cultural difference typically rendered as contrast between fixed national categories rather than relation between social actors. The Indonesian textbook positions learners as prospective interlocutors; the Japanese textbook embeds norms in narrative routine. The article proposes pluricultural relationality as an evaluative and design lens for higher-education language curricula, shifting the guiding question from what culture a textbook shows to how far it lets learners relate to it.

Keywords: pluricultural relationality, critical discourse analysis, foreign-language textbooks, cultural essentialism, higher education curriculum

1. Introduction

1.1 Foreign-language textbooks as cultural discourse in higher education

A textbook that shows a restaurant transaction, a family greeting, a wedding custom, or a morning commute is not simply illustrating vocabulary; it makes a selection about which practice is worth showing, who performs it, and in what setting it becomes intelligible. Research on English (Alzubi et al., 2023; Aoumeur & Ziani, 2022), Korean (Choi & Lee, 2025; Kim, 2025), and Japanese (Fester, 2022; Shi, 2026) as foreign languages has repeatedly documented this selective quality: textbooks do not merely transmit a language, they produce a version of its culture, selected and arranged rather than neutrally given. Both textbooks examined here anchor programmes delivered principally through universities BIPA is offered almost exclusively through Indonesian higher-education institutions, and Tanoshiku Yomou I is used in tertiary Japanese-reading courses of the kind offered at universities such as Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages so the discursive choices analysed here are, directly, decisions about higher-education curriculum content.

Sahabatku Indonesia BIPA 1 (Artating & Novytasari, 2019) teaches Indonesian to foreign speakers and is explicitly framed by its publisher as "bahan diplomasi bahasa Indonesia" (Indonesian-language diplomacy material), consistent with the government's wider policy of internationalizing the Indonesian language (Badan Pengembangan dan Pembinaan Bahasa, 2021), organized around a "Peta Materi" (competency map) pairing communicative objectives with an explicit "Wawasan Keindonesiaan" (Indonesian cultural insight) strand. Tanoshiku Yomou I (Bunka Institute of Language, 1996) is a Japanese reading-comprehension textbook whose preface states its aim as building reading ability while introducing "Japanese culture, customs and various social issues" through everyday genres menus, receipts, advertisements, a folk tale, travel brochures. Because both openly declare cultural transmission as part of their mission, they offer unusually clear ground for examining how cultural norms get built discursively, and whether that leaves room for pluricultural relationality.

1.2 From cultural representation to cultural norms, and the risk of essentialism

Much of the textbook-culture literature asks a "what" question: which cultures appear, how often, in what balance relative to the target, home, and third cultures (Aoumeur & Ziani, 2022; Permatasari et al., 2022). This descriptive tradition stops short of a more consequential "how"

question: how does a textbook make a given practice look normal, expected, or legitimate? A sentence like "Japanese people usually work overtime" or "in Indonesia, people greet elders with Pak/Bu" is not neutral information; it selects one practice among many, attaches it to a generalized actor, and hands it to the learner as a stable expectation about that community. Cultural norms, as used throughout this study, are therefore treated not as facts about a population but as discursively constructed expectations conventions textbook discourse presents as ordinary, appropriate, or legitimate.

That normalizing move carries a well-documented risk: repeated attribution of practices to a generalized national subject can slide into cultural essentialism, treating culture as a stable, homogeneous, nationally bounded property shared by everyone in the group (Dervin & Machart, 2015; Holliday, 1999). Kim's (2025) analysis of Korean-as-a-foreign-language textbooks found that even revised editions still framed culture "as fixed, homogeneous, and nationally bounded, with little attention to hybrid, diasporic, or learners' lived cultural practices." Choi and Lee (2025) reported a similar pattern in Korean-language textbooks used in Thailand, where representations "idealised and oversimplified" the target culture. Within BIPA scholarship, Triami's (2025) discourse analysis found cultural content that, despite its richness, tends to be "stereotypical and lack[ing] depth," while Anggreani (2025) documented uneven allocation of social roles between male and female characters. These findings, from unrelated national contexts, suggest the essentializing tendency is closer to a structural default of beginner-level pedagogy than a quirk of one tradition.

1.3 From interculturality to pluricultural relationality

Applied linguistics has spent roughly three decades pushing back against that default. Byram's (1997/2021) model of intercultural communicative competence set out five "savoirs" attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness casting the learner as an "intercultural speaker" mediating between a home and a target culture, though the model has been criticized for still assuming two fixed cultures to mediate between (Holliday, 2022). Kramsch's (1993) idea of a "third place," a hybrid space belonging fully to neither culture, moved the field from transmission toward negotiation, drawing on Bhabha's (1994) cultural hybridity and Bakhtin's (1981) dialogic view of meaning as co-constructed between self and other. Holliday's (1999) distinction between situated "small

cultures" and essentialist "large cultures" gave researchers a vocabulary for spotting exactly when textbook discourse slides from one into the other, and his "third-space methodology" (Holliday, 2022) pushes comparative materials to resist reconstructing essentialist national blocks even when comparison is the point. Dervin's (2016) typology of "solid," "liquid idealistic," and "liquid realistic" approaches frames the goal as a non-essentialist grasp of "diverse diversities" (Dervin & Machart, 2015) though Kubota (2016) cautions that pluricultural framings can be complicit with a neoliberal multiculturalism celebrating diversity rhetorically while leaving structural inequality untouched, a caution the discussion returns to.

The most consequential recent step is the Council of Europe's (2020) Companion Volume to the CEFR, which formalized descriptors for plurilingual and pluricultural competence. The learner is no longer a mediator between two bounded cultures but a "social agent" whose linguistic and cultural repertoire is partial, dynamic, and continually reorganized (Piccardo & North, 2020; Piccardo et al., 2019) one uneven, interacting whole rather than several separate competences stacked side by side (North et al., 2022), framed as "a cyclical process of exploring and constructing," "an agentic process of selecting and (self)organizing," and "an empowering process in relation to norms," rather than a fixed body of knowledge (Piccardo & North, 2020).

It is this shift from asking what norms are shown to whether those norms open toward relation that the article's central concept, pluricultural relationality, tries to capture: the discursive possibility, built into a textbook's language, images, and activities, for learners to grasp cultural practices through relationships among people, contexts, perspectives, and cultural positions rather than as fixed national attributes. The definition borrows from Byram's intercultural communicative competence and the CEFR's plurilingual/pluricultural competence but differs from both: those frameworks describe a competence to be developed in the learner, whereas pluricultural relationality here is a property of the text itself more or less present in how a passage constructs norms, positions actors, and opens or closes space for comparison and negotiated meaning.

1.4 Research gap, questions, and broader relevance

Three gaps motivate the study. First, most critical discourse work on foreign-language textbooks stays within a single national tradition Korean (Choi & Lee, 2025; Kim, 2025), Japanese (Fester, 2022; Sato & Doerr, 2014; Shi, 2026), English (Alzubi et al., 2023; Aoumeur & Ziani, 2022), or

Indonesian/BIPA (Anjani, 2026; Aswan, 2024; Latupono, 2019; Salsabilla et al., 2022) so comparisons across unrelated traditions, particularly an East Asian and a Southeast Asian one analysed with the same apparatus, remain rare. Second, much BIPA scholarship stays close to content-inventory questions which cultural elements appear, how often, whether locally or nationally sourced (Nova, 2024; Permatasari et al., 2022) rather than how those elements get normalized or how learners are positioned relative to them. Third, although the CEFR Companion Volume has substantially advanced the theory of plurilingual and pluricultural competence as a learner outcome (Council of Europe, 2020; Piccardo & North, 2020), little work has turned pluriculturality into a lens for evaluating textbook discourse and informing curriculum policy. A closely related study, Widianto and Pusse's (2026) discourse analysis of tourism bias across the Sahabatku Indonesia series, supports the view that this comparative, discourse-analytic turn in BIPA scholarship is active, though its focus differs from this study's focus on cultural norms and pluricultural relationality. This study addresses all three gaps by comparing an Indonesian and a Japanese textbook through one five-level framework and by proposing pluricultural relationality as a discourse-analytic construct applicable to how universities select and design foreign-language materials.

Two research questions follow. RQ1 asks how cultural norms are constructed and represented through discourse in Sahabatku Indonesia BIPA 1 and Tanoshiku Yomou I. RQ2 asks to what extent the two textbooks discursively position learners and cultural others in ways that move from normative representation toward pluricultural relationality. Beyond its disciplinary contribution, the study bears on curriculum design in internationalizing universities, where foreign-language materials also function as instruments of cultural and language diplomacy (Aswan, 2024; Wulandari & Konety, 2024).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Cultural representation in foreign-language textbooks

For many learners with limited direct contact with a target-language community, the textbook is a primary, sometimes the only, window onto that culture (Aoumeur & Ziani, 2022). Alzubi et al.'s (2023) analysis of the Saudi EFL series Mega Goal found national identity and culture constructed to reinforce a coherent, idealized national self-image; Aoumeur and Ziani (2022) found an Algerian EFL textbook foregrounded source-culture content so heavily that learners

had little room to see past national boundaries, and Afzall et al. (2021) traced comparable ideological constructions elsewhere. Within Indonesian BIPA research, Permatasari et al. (2022) catalogued the cultural elements running through BIPA materials, finding heavy concentration on tradition and everyday social practice, extended by Tiawati et al. (2024) into a matter of overcoming barriers to cross-cultural understanding; Nova (2024) traced Betawi cultural elements in Sahabatku Indonesia; Pratiwi et al. (2023) examined how BIPA materials represent moral values; and Andriana et al. (2024) examined how a folk-tale-based supplementary text carries Indonesian culture through narrative. On the Japanese side, Sato and Doerr (2014) interrogated how a "standard" Japanese language and culture has historically been constructed within language-education discourse; Fester (2022) analysed cultural content in Japanese textbooks; and Shi (2026) showed Japanese EFL materials building a "sanitized" vision of global economic citizenship around Westernized, middle-class consumer life. Across these unrelated traditions, the finding repeats: textbooks privilege a bounded, idealized national culture, even where stated aims point toward openness.

2.2 Cultural essentialism and its persistence

Cultural essentialism names the problem running through that literature: treating culture as internally uniform and stable across group members by virtue of membership alone (Dervin & Machart, 2015). When a textbook attributes a practice to "Japanese people" or frames "in Indonesia" as a stable behavioural backdrop, it makes what Holliday (1999) calls a "large culture" move, against a "small culture" approach that locates culture in situated groupings not tied to ethnicity or nationality. Kim's (2025) finding that revised editions of a long-running Korean textbook series retained much of their earlier static, nationally bounded construction of culture suggests essentialism is not something textbook revision fixes on its own; it requires active, structural intervention.

2.3 Interculturality, pluriculturality, and the discourse-analytic apparatus

Where the essentialism critique names a problem, the interculturality and pluriculturality literatures offer a trajectory of responses, from Byram's (1997/2021) intercultural communicative competence, through Kramsch's (1993) "third place" and Baker's (2015) decoupling of intercultural awareness from any bounded target culture, to the CEFR Companion Volume's (Council of Europe, 2020) formalization of plurilingual and pluricultural competence as one

dynamically reorganized repertoire (North et al., 2022; Piccardo et al., 2019) framed by Piccardo and North (2020) as relational and agentic by design, the direct ancestor of pluricultural relationality as developed here.

Methodologically, the study draws on Fairclough's (1992, 2015) critical discourse analysis, extended in multimodal and social-actor-focused directions by van Leeuwen (1996, 2008) and Machin and Mayr (2012). Fairclough's three-dimensional model text, discursive practice, social practice warrants treating textbook language as a socially situated practice reproducing particular ways of organizing social relations (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). Van Leeuwen's (1996, 2008) social actor network supplies a systematic inventory of representational choices inclusion versus exclusion, activation versus passivation, genericization versus specification directly applicable to how the two textbooks position learners, "Indonesians," and "Japanese people." Machin and Mayr's (2012) multimodal extension licenses attention to image-text pairing, and van Dijk's (1998) ideology approach supplies a vocabulary for self/other polarization strategies used elsewhere on national identity (Alzubi et al., 2023) and Korean/Japanese cultural discourse (Choi & Lee, 2025; Kim, 2025; Shi, 2026).

2.4 Analytical framework

Bringing these strands together, the study uses a five-level framework running from surface representation to pluricultural relationality: Level 1, Textual Representation (lexical choices, pronouns, modality, evaluation, and visual-textual pairing; Machin & Mayr, 2012); Level 2, Discursive Construction (who speaks, who acts, who stays silent, what counts as normal; Fairclough, 2015; van Dijk, 1998); Level 3, Social Positioning (self/other, insider/outsider, role allocation; van Leeuwen, 1996, 2008); Level 4, Relationality (relationship, context, perspective, comparison, reflexivity; Byram, 2021; Kramsch, 1993); and Level 5, Pluricultural Relationality (whether the discourse lets learners see culture as relational, contextual, plural, and negotiable; Council of Europe, 2020; Dervin, 2016; Piccardo & North, 2020). This framework structures both the coding procedure in Section 3 and the findings in Section 4. Figure 1 summarizes this five-level framework.

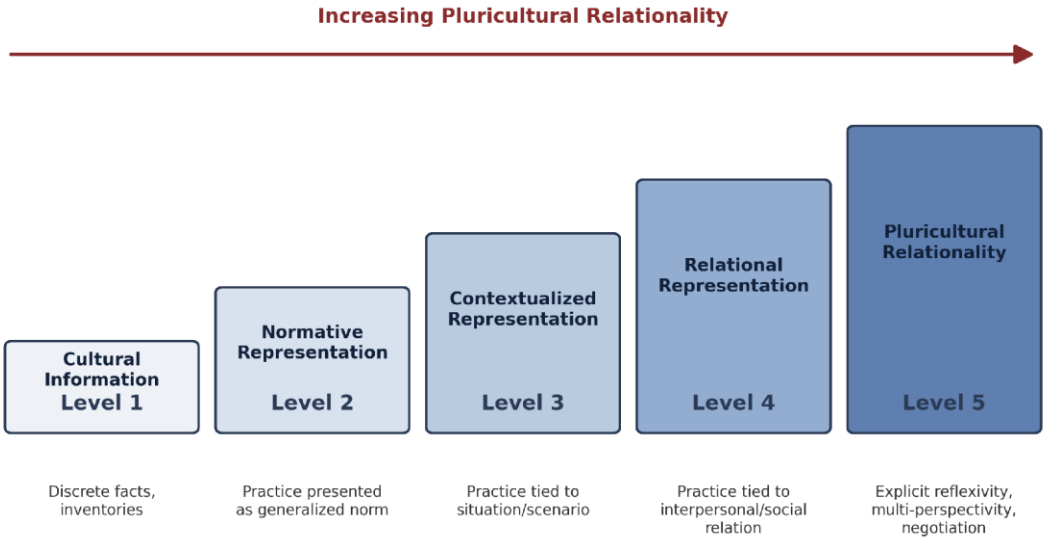


Fig. 1 The five-level framework, from cultural information (Level 1) to pluricultural relationality (Level 5).

3. Method

3.1 Research design and data sources

The study uses a comparative critical discourse analysis design, combining Fairclough's (2015) textual-discursive-social model with van Leeuwen's (1996, 2008) social-actor framework and Machin and Mayr's (2012) multimodal extensions. The same coding matrix (Section 3.3) was applied to both corpora in an iterative, constant-comparison manner, so emergent categories are equally sensitive to patterns in the Indonesian and Japanese data. Two published textbooks make up the corpus. Sahabatku Indonesia: BIPA 1 (Artating & Novytasari, 2019), published by Indonesia's national language body, is a beginner-level (CEFR A1) BIPA textbook, one volume in a seven-level series framed as diplomacy material; its competency map pairs seven communicative units with an explicit "Wawasan Keindonesiaan" strand. Tanoshiku Yomou I (Bunka Institute of Language, 1996) is a beginner-level Japanese reading-comprehension supplement aligned to the Bunka Shokyū Nihongo I–II sequence; its 17 units use authentic or semi-authentic genres menus, receipts, advertisements, a folk tale, travel pamphlets, a health quiz, a celebrity biography, and an essay on marriage-age trends. Both are institutionally produced, target beginner general proficiency for tertiary programmes, and openly declare

cultural transmission as part of their remit features making the two corpora comparable despite different origins, decades, and target languages.

3.2 Data selection and sampling

Because not every page contains cultural discourse in the sense this study cares about some pages are pure grammar drills or vocabulary lists the analysis used criterion-based purposive sampling rather than page-by-page coding. A segment (dialogue, paragraph, narrative passage, instruction, caption, cultural note, exercise, or image-text pairing) entered the corpus if it met at least one of five criteria: cultural-practice representation, social-norm representation, interpersonal relations, self/other positioning, or cultural comparison/reflection. This yielded 34 coded segments from Tanoshiku Yomou I and 29 from Sahabatku Indonesia BIPA 1 (n = 63 total). The selected segments were drawn across the culturally relevant sections of the two books, including competency maps, dialogues, narratives, cultural notes, exercises, and image-text pairings. Source locations and final segment-level classifications are documented in Supplementary Data 1.

3.3 Coding procedure

Six steps map onto the five-level framework in Section 2.4: (1) identify cultural discourse using the five sampling criteria; (2) code each segment for the specific practice or expectation involved; (3) analyse discursive construction who is granted voice, action, and normalcy; (4) analyse social positioning following van Leeuwen (1996, 2008), coding inclusion/exclusion, activation/passivation, genericization/specification, and the insider/outsider status implied for the learner; (5) group coded segments by theme (greeting, daily life/work, food, festival/ritual, marriage/family, reflection/comparison) for side-by-side comparison; and (6) rate each segment against the coding matrix in Table 1 to determine its level.

Table 1. Coding matrix applied across both corpora

Dimension	**Guiding question**
Cultural practice	What practice is represented?
Norm	What is presented as normal/appropriate?
Social actor	Who performs the practice?
Agency	Who is granted agency in the text?

Relation	Who is related to whom?
Position	Who is insider/outsider?
Evaluation	How is the practice evaluated?
Modality	How strongly is the norm stated?
Context	Is context provided?
Variation	Is variation within the group shown?
Self/Other	How are groups represented relative to each other?
Reflexivity	Is the learner invited to reflect on their own position?
Comparison	Does another cultural context appear?
Negotiation	Can meaning be negotiated rather than simply received?
Relationality	Is culture understood through relationships?

The three or four major themes reported in Section 4 emerged from applying this matrix to the coded segments rather than being fixed before the analysis began, consistent with the exploratory logic recommended for comparative discourse analysis of this kind.

3.4 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness rested on three strategies: one constant-comparative coding matrix applied across both corpora rather than separate schemes; grounding every coded claim in a specific, quotable textbook segment (Section 4) rather than an impressionistic summary; and cross-checking the five-level ratings against the theoretical distinctions each level was built on (Section 2.4), so a segment's assigned level could be traced to an explicit criterion rather than intuition. As a final check, the coded ratings were reviewed by two additional co-authors for consistency, with any disagreements discussed and resolved by the coding team.

4. Results

4.1 Cultural norms as everyday social practice

Both textbooks build cultural norms mainly through everyday routine rather than explicit exposition, though through different mechanisms. Tanoshiku Yomou I normalizes largely through narrative repetition, embedding norms such as age- and status-sensitive address,

workplace routine, and seasonal custom inside the ordinary flow of a reading passage rather than flagging them as cultural content. Sahabatku Indonesia BIPA 1 normalizes instead through explicit communicative-function framing: its competency map states the overall aim as helping learners "memahami dan menggunakan ungkapan konteks perkenalan diri dan pemenuhan kebutuhan konkret sehari-hari dan rutin dengan cara sederhana untuk berkomunikasi dengan mitra tutur yang sangat kooperatif" (understand and use expressions for self-introduction and everyday needs, communicating simply with a very cooperative interlocutor). Units 1 ("Salam") and 2 ("Perkenalan") explicitly target both a communicative objective and a "Wawasan Keindonesiaan" objective, making the cultural-transmission function visible in a way Tanoshiku Yomou I's narrative embedding does not: age- and status-sensitive greeting, marked through Pak and Bu, is presented as a named unit of cultural knowledge alongside its communicative function.

4.2 The positioning of learners and social actors

The two corpora diverge more sharply in how they position the learner relative to the actors performing the norm. In Tanoshiku Yomou I, the learner is predominantly positioned as an observer of a third-person narrative rather than a participant; Japanese social actors are activated as the doers of culturally marked practices while the learner remains a passive reader. Sahabatku Indonesia BIPA 1 positions the learner instead as a prospective interlocutor: framing the "mitra tutur" (interlocutor) as "sangat kooperatif" characterizes the interlocutor, for the learner, as someone who actively supports their attempts to communicate, rather than simply describing what Indonesians do from a distance. In van Leeuwen's (1996, 2008) terms, this differs from the genericization and passivation dominating the Japanese corpus: the generalized Indonesian interlocutor is built as facilitative rather than merely observed.

4.3 Cultural difference as contrast or relation

The coding matrix's Relationality dimension distinguishes cultural difference shown as contrast Indonesia = X, Japan = Y, static and non-interacting from cultural difference shown as relation, where a practice carries meaning because of a specific relationship, context, or interaction. Most coded segments in both corpora sit closer to contrast: Unit 11 of Tanoshiku Yomou I, for example, catalogues seasonal events as a static list rather than connecting them to any relationship, perspective, or context.

4.4 Degrees of pluricultural relationality

Applying the five-level framework to all 63 coded segments gives the comparative distribution in Table 2. Both textbooks sit mainly at Levels 2 and 3 (normative and contextualized representation), with only a handful of segments reaching Level 4, and none in either corpus fully meeting Level 5, which additionally requires explicit learner reflexivity and negotiated, multi-perspectival meaning-making.

Table 2. Distribution of coded segments across the five-level framework

Level	**Characterization**	**Tanoshiku Yomou I (n = 34)**	**Sahabatku Indonesia BIPA 1 (n = 29)**
1 - Cultural information	Discrete facts, inventories	6	5
2 - Normative representation	Practice presented as generalized norm	15	11
3 - Contextualized representation	Practice tied to situation/scenario	9	10
4 - Relational representation	Practice tied to interpersonal/social relation	4	3
5 - Pluricultural relationality	Explicit reflexivity, multi-perspectivity, negotiation	0	0

Figure 2 visualizes this distribution, showing that both textbooks concentrate at Levels 2-3 while neither reaches Level 5.

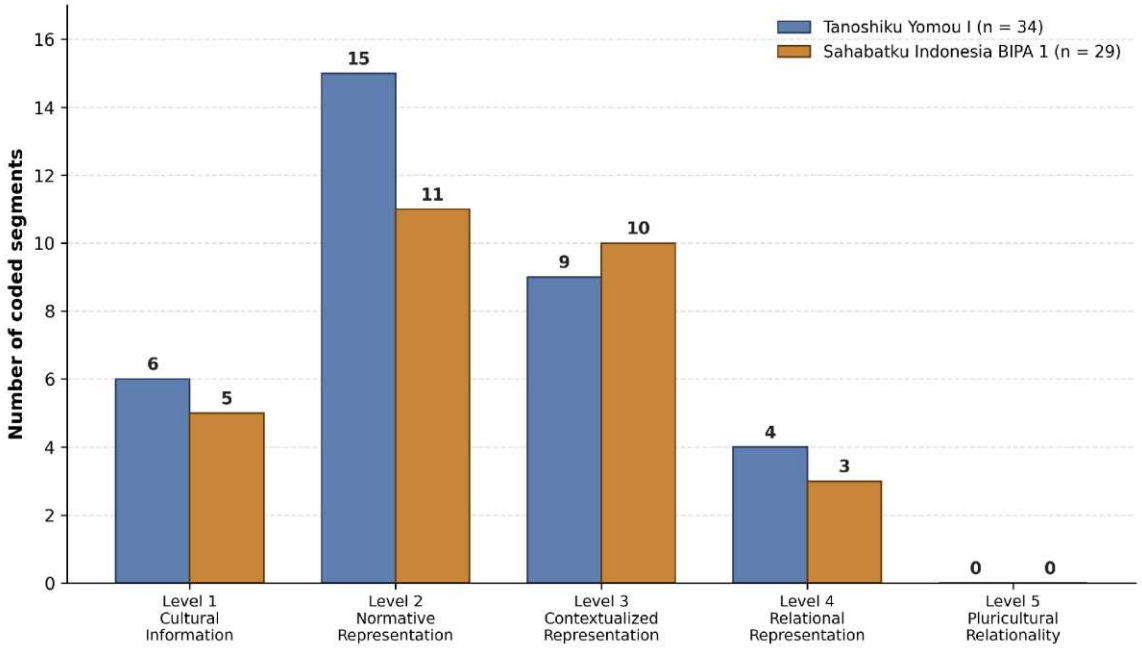


Fig. 2 Distribution of the 63 coded segments across the five levels in Tanoshiku Yomou I and Sahabatku Indonesia BIPA 1.

Given the purposive rather than exhaustive sampling described in Section 3.2, this distribution should be read as indicative rather than a full statistical census. The pattern across the coded segments nonetheless points consistently in one direction: in neither textbook does the discourse, as coded here, reach the reflexive, multi-perspectival meaning-making that Level 5 requires. Both contain raw material such relationality could be built from a diet-related self-assessment passage in the Japanese corpus invites self-comparison, and the BIPA competency map invites anticipatory relation-building but neither pushes that material into the reflexive, negotiated meaning-making Level 5 requires. This fits the broader pattern in the literature reviewed in Section 2 (Choi & Lee, 2025; Kim, 2025; Triami, 2025), where even textbooks with an explicit intercultural or diplomatic mission, as Sahabatku Indonesia has, tend to default to normative and contextualized representation.

5. Discussion

5.1 What the comparison reveals about textbook cultural discourse

Two textbooks separated by language family, publication era, national origin, and institutional purpose converge on a strikingly similar structure: both default to normative and contextualized

representation, and both position the learner asymmetrically relative to the generalized "national" actor as observer in the Japanese case, as anticipatory interlocutor in the Indonesian case. That convergence is consistent with the essentializing tendency documented in single-textbook studies (Alzubi et al., 2023; Kim, 2025), and is compatible with beginner-level textbooks more broadly favouring digestible, economical cultural content over relational, reflexive meaning-making rather than this being a quirk of one tradition; confirming how general this default is would require a larger comparative sample than the two textbooks examined here. The two corpora nonetheless normalize through different mechanisms narrative repetition versus explicit communicative-functional framing so raising pluricultural relationality means pulling different levers in each: narrative pluralization in the Japanese-style corpus, explicit negotiation prompts layered onto the existing architecture in the Indonesian-style one.

5.2 Why cultural norms matter for language learning and curriculum design

Cultural norms matter pedagogically because learners rarely receive them as neutral information; they receive them as models for anticipated social behaviour. A learner who takes an overtime-and-drinking routine as "how Japanese people live," or takes "Pak/Bu" as a universal Indonesian address convention, carries that expectation into future encounters where it may or may not hold. This is one mechanism through which textbook-level essentialism, however unintentional, has been argued to feed real-world stereotyping a concern raised directly for BIPA materials by Triami (2025) and Anggreani (2025), and for Korean materials by Choi and Lee (2025). For universities selecting or commissioning materials, this is not only a linguistic quality question but a curricular one: a textbook's discursive defaults become part of what a programme teaches about culture, whether or not that is a stated learning outcome.

5.3 Distinguishing cultural representation from relational cultural learning

The analysis in Section 4 points to relationship, not content richness or accuracy, as the distinguishing feature. Unit 17 of Tanoshiku Yomou I achieves relation by tracing marriage-age norms to shifting gender relations; the BIPA competency map gestures toward it by tying cultural insight to interlocutor relation. Where relational anchoring is missing the seasonal-calendar catalogue in Unit 11, decontextualized vocabulary drills in either corpus cultural content stays at the level of inert information: memorizable and testable, but not generative of the interpretive capacity pluricultural relationality names.

5.4 Designing textbook discourse for pluricultural relationality

Three concrete moves suggest themselves as levers toward Level 5, each directly actionable in curriculum and materials-adoption decisions. First, explicit reflexivity prompts: rather than asking only whether a learner's routine resembles a character's, a redesigned unit might ask learners to compare that routine against norms in their own context and a peer's, surfacing variation instead of measuring only the target culture against a single assumed home-culture baseline. Second, multi-perspectival framing: a discussion of changing marriage norms could include the voices of men and women, different generations, or people who have chosen not to marry, rather than narrating the trend in an impersonal register. Third, explicit negotiation-of-meaning tasks: BIPA 1's existing "mitra tutur yang sangat kooperatif" framing could extend into activities where learners notice and work through a mismatch between their expectations and an interlocutor's actual response, rather than assuming cooperative behaviour is simply predictable. These moves track the reflexivity, multiperspectivity, and negotiation rows in the coding matrix (Table 1) and the CEFR Companion Volume's framing of pluricultural competence as agentic and exploratory (Piccardo & North, 2020) though Kubota's (2016) caution applies: designing for pluricultural relationality means building genuine negotiation into tasks, not adding diversity-themed content that leaves the textbook's normative structure untouched.

5.5 Theoretical and institutional implications

The study's main theoretical contribution is to move pluricultural relationality from a learner competence, as in the CEFR Companion Volume's descriptor scales, to a textual-discursive property that can be analysed, compared, and designed for on its own terms a materials-evaluation criterion complementary to the content-inventory tradition (Nova, 2024; Permatasari et al., 2022), the essentialism-critique tradition (Holliday, 2022; Kim, 2025), and the ideology-of-bias tradition exemplified by Widianto and Pusse (2026). Content-inventory analysis asks what cultural material is present; essentialism critique asks whether it is stereotyped; pluricultural relationality adds a third question does the discourse open a relational space where learners can interpret, compare, and negotiate cultural meaning, rather than just receive it? For institutions, decisions normally treated as procurement or accreditation matters which textbook a programme adopts, how a locally produced textbook is revised are thus also curricular decisions with real consequences for what students encounter.

6. Conclusion

This study traced a movement from cultural norms to pluricultural relationality across two textbooks that are structurally comparable but nationally and linguistically distinct: Sahabatku Indonesia BIPA 1 and Tanoshiku Yomou I. Using a five-level comparative discourse-analytic framework built on Fairclough's (2015) textual-discursive-social model, van Leeuwen's (1996, 2008) social-actor network, and the CEFR Companion Volume's (Council of Europe, 2020; Piccardo & North, 2020) account of plurilingual and pluricultural competence, the analysis shows that, in the two textbooks examined here, cultural representation runs along a continuum from normative transmission to more contextualized, and occasionally relational, forms of meaning-making. Both textbooks build cultural norms mainly through narrative routine (the Japanese corpus) or communicative-functional framing (the Indonesian corpus), both position the learner asymmetrically relative to a generalized national actor, and neither fully reaches the reflexive, multi-perspectival, negotiated meaning-making that would satisfy this study's Level 5 criterion even though Sahabatku Indonesia's "Wawasan Keindonesiaan" architecture and Tanoshiku Yomou I's narrative self-assessment devices each contain material such relationality could plausibly be built from through targeted redesign.

Pluricultural relationality, as developed here, offers a useful lens for asking whether textbook discourse lets learners relate cultural practices to social relationships, perspectives, and contexts, rather than absorbing them as fixed national attributes. It does not replace the content-inventory and essentialism-critique traditions already established in textbook research; it complements them, giving materials designers, curriculum developers, and the higher-education institutions that adopt these materials a fuller set of tools for evaluating cultural content. A few limitations qualify these conclusions. The two corpora differ in publication era (1996 versus 2019) and in the volume of text directly analysed, limiting how far any claim about national tradition can be pushed. The purposive rather than exhaustive sampling means Table 2's distribution should be read as illustrative rather than a full census. The five-level ratings reflect the coding team's theory-grounded interpretation of each segment against the matrix in Table 1, checked internally within the team as a final consistency step rather than validated through a separately quantified inter-rater reliability procedure; a study built around formal inter-rater statistics could test these ratings more rigorously. Because the comparison is limited to two textbooks, the convergence reported in Section 5.1 characterizes these two cases specifically and should not be read as a

claim about foreign-language textbooks in general, even where the pattern is consistent with single-textbook studies from other traditions reviewed in Section 2. And the study analysed textbook discourse on its own, apart from classroom use; how instructors mediate or push back against a textbook's discursive defaults in practice a factor Choi and Lee (2025) foreground in their reception-oriented study falls outside what a text-only design can capture.

Future work could extend the framework in three directions: applying it to later volumes in each series to test whether pluricultural relationality increases as learners advance; pairing this approach with classroom-based or learner-reception work; and applying the five-level framework to a larger, more geographically varied set of textbooks used in university programmes. That kind of work would move pluricultural relationality from a lens applied after the fact toward a design principle and, potentially, an accreditation or curriculum-review criterion for the next generation of foreign-language teaching materials in higher education.

Data availability

The data supporting this study consist of 63 purposively selected discourse segments from two published foreign-language textbooks and the segment-level analytical coding used to generate the distributions reported in Table 2 and Figure 2. To support verification during peer review, Supplementary Data 1 provides a source-located coding audit for all 63 segments (34 from Tanoshiku Yomou I and 29 from Sahabatku Indonesia: BIPA 1), including source location, analytical dimensions, final five-level classification, and coding rationale. The supplementary workbook also contains the operational codebook and a verification sheet that recalculates the reported descriptive counts. This audit dataset was reconstructed for the revision from the source texts, the study's coding matrix, and the final classifications reported in the manuscript because a separate contemporaneous archival worksheet was not retained. No inferential statistical analysis or data-transformation script was used. Both source textbooks are copyrighted works and cannot be reproduced or redistributed in full. Accordingly, Supplementary Data 1 provides source locators and short analytical paraphrases rather than substantial reproduction of copyrighted textbook content. The Japanese-language edition of Tanoshiku Yomou I was the primary source, and an Indonesian-language rendering supplied by the authors was used as a checking aid. Further clarification necessary for editorial verification can be requested from the corresponding author.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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Ethics declaration

This study analysed the textual and visual content of two published foreign-language textbooks (one openly available, one a copyrighted commercial publication; see Data availability) and did not involve human participants, personal data, or animals. Ethical review and informed consent were therefore not required.

Author contributions

Didik Nurhadi and Prima Vidya Asteria conceived and designed the study. Prima Vidya Asteria, Parmin Parmin, and Gatut Susanto developed the coding framework and conducted the critical discourse analysis. Trisna Andarwulan and Yufita Ng contributed to data validation and internal checking. Deshinta Arrova Dewi and Junaini Kasdan contributed to the theoretical framing of pluricultural relationality and cross-checked the Japanese-language textbook data. Prima Vidya Asteria wrote the original draft of the manuscript, and all authors reviewed, critically revised, and approved the final version.

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