



Cultural Contents in Digital Authentic Greeting Cards as English Teaching Materials for Junior High Schools

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Abstract

This study aimed to discover the cultural contents in the digital authentic greeting cards as English teaching materials for junior high schools. The research data were the cultural values in the form of words, phrases, clauses, or sentences that are contained in the texts on the digital authentic greeting cards. The data sources were taken from several websites providing free digital greeting cards to be downloaded. The data were analyzed with the framework of the cultural dimensions by Moran (2001) and the cultural sources by Chao (2011) by using a qualitative content analysis method. The findings revealed 101 cultural contents that were classified into the four cultural dimensions and three sources of culture. The cultural contents were mostly identified in the Universality across Culture and represented by the Practices dimension through activities and language expressions. It was indicated that a large proportion of the cultural contents were included in universal contents that are not specific to any particular country and were represented by actions and interactions carried out by the cultural members.

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INTRODUCTION

Recently, there has been a spate of interest in using authentic materials in the classroom. A passion for 'authentic materials' has dominated language teaching for some years (Scrivener, 2005). The materials in the authentic texts are believed to provide contexts in foreign language learning. Since context is an essential part of constructing meaning, the exposure to the real language used in a real context will benefit the students as well (Berardo, 2006). They will relate what they are learning with what they experience in a real-life setting because the materials connect the classroom context to the authentic and natural language situation. A prior study by Kozhevnikova (2014) also revealed that the use of authentic materials in the classroom increased students' cultural awareness since the materials that represent non-EFL environments can exemplify certain language functions in



operation. There are situations that EFL learners may encounter through their socio-cultural interaction with native speakers of English.

Culture and language are linked to each other (Valdes, 1986; Robinson, 1988; Byram, 1989; Harrison, 1990; Kramsch, 1993a, in Valentina, 2020). The relationship between language and culture has been stressed by researchers in the language education field (Xiao, 2010). Particularly for EFL, taking into account the diverse language needs of learners, the language teaching shall have corresponding communication skills, including critical thinking, intercultural knowledge and understanding, and a heightened sense of cultural awareness (Reimann, 2009). Cross-cultural understanding also happens to be one of the 21st-century skills—critical skills in the 21st-century era (Binkley et al. as cited in Mayuni, 2020), as the world has become increasingly multicultural. Hence, Xiao (2010) believed that learning about different cultures can provide the learners with a more open-minded approach toward international understanding. It also provides a better understanding of one's own culture by comparing it with other cultures. Using authentic materials for language learning may be the way to promote students' cross-cultural understanding.

As a complex concept that can be defined differently in any professional context such as human societies, groups, systems, behaviors, and activities (Hinkel as cited in Kim & Paek, 2015), the cultural contents are classified into five dimensions; they are Products, Practices, Perspectives, Communities, and Persons (Moran, 2001), and five sources; they are Source Culture, Target Culture, International Culture, Intercultural Interaction, and Universality across Cultures (Chao, 2011). In terms of dimensions, Products indicate all artifacts produced or adopted by the members of the culture; Practices include the full range of actions and interactions accomplished by a particular group of a community; Perspectives represent the perceptions, beliefs, values, and attitudes that underlie the products and guide behavior in the practice of culture; Communities cover the specific social contexts (e.g., national culture, language, gender, race, religion), circumstances (e.g., religious ceremony), and groups (e.g., political party, sports team, social club, charity organization, family, coworker) in which carry out cultural practices; and Persons refer to individual members who embody the culture and its communities in unique ways. In terms of sources, Source Culture refers to the learners' own culture as content; Target Culture includes English-speaking countries (Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, the UK, and the US); International Culture covers cultures other than the learners' own country and English-speaking cultures; Intercultural Interaction includes the comparison, reflection, or awareness of the differences and similarities between the local/source and the target/international culture; and Universality Across Culture refers to general knowledge/content that is not specific to any particular culture or country or culture-free elements.

The greeting card belongs to the short functional text that becomes one of the necessary genres to cover at the Junior High level. It is used to refer to complete and coherent passages of spoken or written language that illustrates messages that aim to convey an expression of gratitude, sympathy, affection, goodwill, or other sentiments (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2017). It is usually given on special occasions and mostly written for personal purposes. Considering the purpose, using authentic greeting cards in the classroom can avoid communication problems since the key purpose of greeting cards is to communicate by emphasizing the intended messages. It also allows the learners to explore more implicit culture contained in the text.



Greeting cards often come in a form of paper products which people send in an envelope along with a bucket of flowers or hampers. As the emergence of updated digital advancement, greeting cards are now commonly sent in a digital format either via e-mail, social media, or chat applications. Thus, today's teenagers are urged to be able to be familiar with it and make one. These lifestyle changes have encouraged education to catch up with the latest technology and massive use of the internet as a breakthrough for teaching and learning activities (Gonzalez-Vera, 2016). People are now used to such digital learning materials as e-books, digital texts, videos, websites, software applications, and others, and the chance for digital greeting cards in learning English is also wide open. Moreover, this creating process will contribute not only to the students' real-life language use but also to students' altruism and creativity, which become 21st-century skills.

Several existing studies that focused on analyzing cultural content in EFL textbooks showed imbalanced proportions in cultural aspects and sources. A study by Zulkarnaen et al. (2017) found the Source Culture as the highest representation in the "When English Rings A Bell" textbook for grade VII. In the "English on Target" textbook for grade X, Masturah (2019) found that the Target Culture is dominantly presented as the highest percentage. Meanwhile, an analysis by Fauza (2018) revealed interesting results, that textbooks published by the Ministry of Education and Culture for different levels contained different representations of culture. Some previous studies also claimed that the Products dimension dominated the cultural aspect of the textbooks (Kim & Paek, 2015; Chao, 2011), while the other dimensions showed a biased proportion. The result of the previous studies revealed gaps in the occurrence of cultural representation. However, while the existing studies have discussed the distribution of each classification, they have not addressed the implication of the cultural contents to students' cultural awareness, the impact of the distribution, or the relation with cross-cultural understanding. Besides, there have not been many kinds of text for EFL learning material as the subject of cultural content analysis study. Most of them only focused on textbooks, whereas non-textbook learning materials have been widely used in classroom learning nowadays. There should be a larger area of study regarding cultural content analysis of authentic materials for EFL. More studies are needed to verify the previous findings and to explore more about the authentic materials.

Despite the fact that the use of authentic materials in the classroom increased students' cultural awareness, studies on authentic greeting cards still lack; thus, the researchers intended to analyze the cultural contents in the digital authentic greeting cards to help teachers consider using them in classroom activities. More specifically, this study tried to investigate what cultural dimensions and cultural sources are available in the selected authentic greeting cards. Therefore, this study was expected to fill the gaps that were mentioned before.

RESEARCH METHOD

Qualitative content analysis was used as the design of this study to analyze the cultural contents in the digital authentic greeting cards. The purpose of using qualitative research was to explore a problem and develop a detailed understanding of a central phenomenon in the educational research context (Creswell, 2012). The content analysis analyzed the texts to determine the cultural contents



and how they are presented in the digital authentic greeting cards. Gheyle and Jacobs (2017) defined content analysis as a research method to fit the formless content of messages which could be in a variety of texts, images, symbols, or audio data.

The data in this study were the cultural values in the form of words, phrases, clauses, or sentences that are contained in the texts on the digital authentic greeting cards. The data sources were taken from several websites providing free digital greeting cards to be downloaded. They were 123Greetings, Greetings Island, and Canva. Those websites were chosen because they are considered very accessible and free to use. The analysis table as the research instrument was adopted from the five dimensions of culture by Moran (2001) and the five sources of culture by Chao (2011).

There were several steps in the procedure of collecting and analyzing the data: (1) Selected the greeting cards from several sources. (2) Got familiar with the texts by reading comprehensively. (3) Organized the data by coding the greeting cards before analyzing the content. (4) Identified the data into the categories of cultural dimensions and sources using the instruments. (5) Calculated the major cultural dimension and cultural source in number and percentage. (6) Interpreted the data based on the related theories and frameworks used.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Results

The data analysis results from 34 greeting cards sourced from three selected websites, revealing that cultural contents in the digital authentic greeting cards exist. The data distribution and percentage show the total appearance of 101 cultural contents divided into five dimensions of culture and 99 cultural contents divided into five sources of culture. However, the findings also showed unbalanced proportions in cultural dimensions and cultural sources.

The dimensions of culture identified in the digital authentic greeting cards are Products, Practices, Perspectives, and Communities with the domination of the Practices dimension. No occurrence in the Persons dimension is found. See the table below for further detailed frequency and percentage of each dimension.

Table 1. Distribution and Percentage of Cultural Dimensions

Dimensions of Culture	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Products	33	33%
Practices	51	50%
Perspectives	10	10%
Communities	7	7%
Persons	0	0%
Total	101	100%

The dimension of products is categorized into four categories which are artifacts (e.g., name, food, documents, language, money, tools), places (e.g., building, cities, houses), institutions (e.g., family, law, economy, religion, education, politics), and art forms (e.g., music, clothes, dancing, painting, movie, architecture). The dimension of Products in the data is mentioned in words, phrases,



or clauses without any further explanation. For instance, the names of a person such as *Amanda*, *Aaron*, *Danielle*, and *Marty* are mentioned. Some foods like *cookies*, *ice cream*, *cocoa puffs*, and *M&M's* are also noticed in the texts. Places and art forms are also mentioned, such as *school* and *sweaters*. Slangs like *xoxoxo*, *beary*, and *pawsome* are also found in the texts. Below are some examples of how the dimension of Products is represented in the texts.

Data	Explanation
<p>Happy Birthday, Friend. Just dropping in to wish you a very happy day, I hope you get to spend it in the nicest possible way. Sending warm and loving wishes along with birthday cheer, and special birthday greetings for a friend I hold so dear... xoxoxo</p>	<p>The last word xoxoxo means hugs and kisses. It can be categorized as Products since it is an informal term or a slang language. This Product belongs to artifacts.</p>
<p>To the best grammaie in the world. Here's a little note: To thank you for all the warm hugs, delicious cookies, and cozy sweaters. I love you!</p>	<p>Clothes are an element that can be categorized as a dimension of Product in Art Forms.</p>

The dimension of Practices is categorized into four categories which are operations, acts, scenarios, and lives. Operations refer to the interaction between the person and the product (e.g., cooking a meal). Acts include established language expressions such as brief utterances and responses in speech acts, scenarios refer to traditions or customs that are parts of the culture members, and lives are stories of the culture members. The large percentage of the Practices dimension in this finding shows that the cultural contents are mainly represented by actions and interactions accomplished by the members of the culture. Speech acts with various expressions such as congratulating others, showing attention, giving compliments, and giving encouragement made the most appearance in the texts. Besides speech acts, the dimension of Practices is also represented by operations (manipulation of cultural products) and scenarios (extended communicative products). They can be found in the form of activities such as sending a flower and celebrations such as birthdays, thanksgiving, and new year. Here are some examples of how the dimension of Practices is represented in the texts.

Data	Explanation
<p>Thank You. Sometimes a thank you simply won't do, so I'm sending a flower and some sunshine too ... Thanks so much xxx</p>	<p>This sentence contains interaction between the cultural member and the products (the flower and sunshine). This belongs to an example of Operation as a dimension of Practices.</p>
<p>To all my loved ones, Happy Thanksgiving! May we always be thankful for the blessings we receive every day. Enjoy the holiday!</p>	<p>This greeting was sent to celebrate a thanksgiving day. It is an annual holiday in the United States and Canada to celebrate the harvest and blessings of the year (Britannica, 2017). This word belongs to the example of Scenario as a dimension of Practices.</p>

The dimension of Perspectives represents how the members of the culture see some aspects of life. It underlies the Products and guides people's behavior in the practice of culture. This dimension is categorized into four groups which are perceptions, beliefs, values, and attitudes. Perceptions can be expressed explicitly through sayings or other explicit forms of expression, but they can sometimes



be implicit. The Perspectives dimension is recorded ten times occurrence in the texts. They are identified in the form of perceptions and beliefs. See the examples below.

Data	Explanation
A teacher is a person who surrounds her students with inspiration to learn again every day.	It is a perception about teachers as an inspirational person that gives great learning to the students.
Get well soon. Every day of recovery builds strength. Have patience with the process and yourself. Can't wait to see you well again!	It is a belief that the time we take for recovery will not be wasted because it builds more strength every day.

The dimension of Communities includes specific groups of the culture in which members carry out cultural practices in specific social, and physical settings. The setting can be nation, language, gender, race, religion, socioeconomic class, workplace, or neighborhood. This dimension is categorized into three categories which are social contexts (e.g., national culture, language, gender, race, religion), circumstances (e.g., religious ceremony), and groups (e.g., sports team, social club, charity organization, family, coworker). The Communities dimension is the least dimension in the texts as it is only recorded seven times of occurrence in the texts. They are found in the form of groups and limited to school and family communities only. See the examples below.

Data	Explanation
Thank you! What a wonderful teacher you are, Miss Lucas! Thank you for caring so much about your students and the knowledge they need.	The teacher and students as the participants belong to one community, which is the school. Both teacher and students have their own roles in the community.
To my brothers and sisters , Have a Happy Eid! May Allah's blessings be with you always. May you have a long and peaceful life!	The brothers and sisters as the participants belong to one community, which is Islam.

In terms of the sources, three out of five cultural sources occur in the data, with the Universality across Culture as the highest percentage, followed by Target Culture and International Culture, while Source Culture and Intercultural Interaction have no appearances in the texts. See Table 2 below for the detailed frequency and percentage of the analysis results.

Table 2. Distribution and Percentage of Cultural Sources

Sources of Culture	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Source Culture	0	0%
Target Culture	26	26%
International Culture	4	4%
Intercultural Interaction	0	0%
Universality across Culture	69	70%
Total	99	100%

The Target Culture is dominated by the Products dimension with the names of persons with the highest appearance, for example, *Nic*, *Rachel*, *Amy*, *Louis*, *Melissa*, and *Bill*. The dimension of



Practices and Perspectives are also included in the Target Culture, for example, celebrations such as thanksgiving and best friends day, and quotations from a famous person. A detailed explanation can be seen below.

Data	Explanation
You're the ice to my cream, you're the cocoa to my puffs , you're the M to my M&M's , you're the help to my mend, you're the best to my friend.	Cocoa puffs and M&M's are both American products or brands. They are popularly sold in Canada, America, and Europe.
I'd jump for joy to hear you're feeling better! Or maybe hop slightly. Get well soon, Bill!	This name is common in English-speaking countries.
Stars don't struggle to shine... All I wish you is the best of luck in your exams.	It is a quote from Donald Driver, an American football wide receiver.

The International Culture is recorded four times in the texts, which is the least. The names of a person mainly represent the International Culture as a part of the Products dimension.

Data	Explanation
Thank you. Thank you so much, Mrs. Lee! You kept encouraging me and you were right - I could do it! Love, Melissa.	Lee is the second most common surname in Korea. This name is also common among people in China.

The big proportion of Universality across Cultures indicates that the cultural contents are mainly represented by universal contents that are not specific to any particular culture or country. The contents are mainly related to linguistic knowledge and practice without focusing on any particular culture. Each cultural content included in Universality across Culture is a part of the four dimensions of culture found in the texts. The majority of expressions that appear in almost all texts are included in Universality across Culture. Some perceptions and groups from Perspectives and Communities dimensions such as school, teacher, students, brother, and sisters are also depicted as Universality across Cultures. Here are some examples.

Data	Explanation
Thank You. Sometimes a thank won't do, so I'm sending a flower and some sunshine too...Thank you so much xxx	Flower is an artifact as a part of the dimension of Products that do not belong to any country. It also refers to a general flower, not a specific one that represents a country.
To my brothers and sisters , Have a Happy Eid! May Allah's blessings be with you always. May you have a long and peaceful life!	The brothers and sisters as the participants belong to the family community, a general group that is not specific to a country.
Get well soon. Every day of recovery builds strength. Have patience with the process and yourself. Can't wait to see you well again!	This is the writer's belief that is considered universal, not particular to a certain country.

B. Discussion

While several previous studies that focused on identifying cultural contents in EFL textbooks found that the dimension of Products has the highest number of appearances (Kim & Paek, 2015; Masturah, 2019), the frequent appearance of the dimension of Practices shows different results. Almost every text contains one act as cultural content since the texts in greeting cards aim to communicate language expressions. However, the findings of other cultural dimensions have similar results to the previous study by Yuen (2011). The study stated that the three dimensions are less frequently presented in the textbooks.

The high number of Universality across Culture identified on the digital authentic greeting cards have similar results to a previous study that analyzed EFL textbooks' cultural contents (Chao, 2011). She stated that the inclusion of Universality across Culture content perhaps could attract more EFL learners of different cultural backgrounds or countries to use it.

The findings showed unbalanced proportions in cultural dimensions and sources. However, the lack of comprehensiveness and depth can hardly be avoided, considering that the greeting cards used are authentic materials designed not for language students. How greeting cards as authentic materials are used to communicate language expressions is the possible reason why the cultural contents are not exposed comparably. In the existing studies that focused on analyzing the EFL textbooks, the cultural contents are not as unbalanced as they appear in the greeting cards analyzed in the present research. The artificial materials used in the classroom are helpful for the students to achieve the learning objectives. However, the students also need to be exposed to the natural language used outside the classroom. Using authentic materials such as the digital authentic greeting cards in the classroom can make excellent learning tools for students precisely as the materials help the students to be exposed to real natural situations. Rao (2019) stated that the effective use of authentic materials in the classroom is by adopting the authentic materials that can create interest among the learners.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The cultural contents existed in the digital authentic greeting cards and were presented through four dimensions of culture (Practices, Products, Perspectives, Communities) and three sources of culture (Target Culture, Source Culture, Universality across Culture). There were unbalanced proportions of cultural contents contained in the digital authentic greeting cards. However, the lack of comprehensiveness and depth could hardly be avoided, considering that the greeting cards used are authentic materials designed not for language students. Using authentic materials such as the digital authentic greeting cards in the classroom can make excellent learning tools for students precisely as the materials help the students to be exposed to real natural situations. Teachers can use the cultural contents contained in the texts to build students' cultural awareness. However, the basic knowledge of international culture is still needed by the students. Thus, they may have authentic greeting cards to support their background knowledge in learning a language and its culture.

Therefore, some recommendations could be proposed: (1) Teachers to consider the familiarity and acceptability in making use of authentic greeting cards from different sources as well to explore other sources that can be used for authentic greeting cards. (2) Future researchers to study the



Intercultural Interaction to find out how textbook activities help the students to improve their skills in interacting in diverse communities since there has been no study that explored the Intercultural Interaction in the EFL learning materials. (3) There shall be a larger area of study focusing on cultural contents on different learning materials for EFL aside from textbooks. More studies are needed to verify the previous findings and to explore more about the authentic materials.

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