

## MEANINGS OF SELECTED CULTURAL WORDS IN SOME EFL COURSEBOOKS FOR ENGLISH MAJORS

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**Abstract.** Cultural words constitute a significant part of the vocabulary presented in seven EFL coursebooks and reflect various cultural and historical aspects of different nations. Accordingly, the meanings and cultural connotations of these words have attracted increasing attention from linguistic researchers. This study aims to investigate the semantic and cultural meanings of selected cultural words found in seven EFL coursebooks for English-majored students. To achieve this objective, the study employed a qualitative semantic analysis in which cultural words were collected from the selected coursebooks, classified into specific thematic groups, and analyzed based on their meanings and cultural connotations. The analysis was conducted to identify how cultural vocabulary reflects the historical backgrounds, values, and cultural characteristics of different countries. The findings indicate that some cultural words contain a relatively fixed cultural meaning strongly associated with a particular nation or cultural context. In contrast, several words demonstrate multiple meanings depending on communicative and cultural contexts, requiring learners to carefully interpret their meanings in specific situations. The study also reveals that certain cultural words cannot be directly translated into the target language because of their culture-specific meanings and symbolic associations. In such cases, preserving the original meaning and providing appropriate cultural explanations are considered necessary for effective understanding. Based on these findings, the study proposes several pedagogical implications for the teaching and learning of language and culture in EFL contexts.

**Keywords:** cultural words, EFL coursebooks, meaning, pedagogical implications.

### 1. Introduction

Cultural words constitute an important part of the vocabulary associated with a wide range of topics. According to Wierzbicka (1997), cultural words are culture-specific expressions that reflect the ways people think, behave, and experience life within their social communities. Many of these words appear in EFL coursebooks designed for language learners. Therefore, linguists have paid considerable attention to examining their syntactic and semantic characteristics, identifying many distinctive features associated with this type of vocabulary. In this study, cultural words collected from selected EFL coursebooks for English majors at a university are systematically analyzed in terms of their meanings and cultural implications. The analysis highlights how certain words convey different meanings across cultural groups, with particular emphasis placed on their cultural connotations. Through these differences, the study reveals important cultural and historical characteristics of various countries, including English-speaking nations. Therefore, the findings are expected to provide useful insights for linguists, language teachers, students, and anyone interested in language and culture by emphasizing the importance of integrating cultural-semantic analysis into vocabulary instruction. For language learners, the study also highlights the need to develop cultural awareness alongside linguistic knowledge to achieve more effective intercultural communication. The following questions are used for the research on the meanings of cultural words from the EFL coursebooks for English majors at a tertiary institution in Hanoi, Vietnam: i) How many cultural words were found in the selected EFL coursebooks?; ii) What are the meanings of these words in Vietnamese?

### 2. Literature review

#### 2.1. Definition of cultural words

*Cultural words* are considered very important in any language and they help reveal the culture of each nation using that language. In research, the concept of cultural vocabulary is relatively diverse. Wierzbicka explains that cultural words have specific cultural characteristics, reflecting many experiences about the way of doing and thinking of people in social communities. It is considered as the presence, revealing basic cultural

values. Cultural vocabulary reflects and expresses the characteristics of life in each society and the way of thinking of that community. Wierzbicka says that studying cultural words leads us to “the center of the whole complex of cultural values and attitudes” (Wierzbicka, 1997, p.17).

Levisen (2012) clarifies the concept of *cultural words*; the author called it words in a language that contribute to “pointing” to a culture. Meanwhile, Li, Ran, & Xia (2010) explain that cultural words- or words with cultural connotations- are those that carry hidden meanings beyond their literal definitions. Through usage, these words acquire special, culturally specific significance. At that time, cultural connotations were formed through the long historical and cultural development of each ethnic group. They were closely associated with legends, beliefs, and traditions such as ancestor worship passed down through generations. Over thousands of years, these cultural connotations were repeatedly reflected in human language as well as in literary and artistic works. Gradually, they became stabilized as cultural symbols carrying specific cultural meanings. As a result, some words came to embody shared cultural associations, enabling people within the same cultural community to implicitly understand them in communication (Li, Ran, & Xia, 2010, p. 695).

From a meaning perspective, connotation is considered an important meaning of vocabulary because it refers to the additional implied meanings, emotions, or cultural associations attached to a word beyond its literal meaning. In particular, cultural connotation represents the culturally specific aspect of meanings, as it reflects the values, beliefs, historical experiences, and social practices of a nation or ethnic group. Therefore, the meanings of cultural vocabulary cannot be fully understood without examining their connotative and cultural meanings. When referring to cultural vocabulary, people often associate it with certain general connotations or specific cultural connotations within a particular national culture. Cultural vocabulary thus possesses a distinct national character and is strongly dependent on context. Although people across cultures may perceive the same objective world, differences in natural conditions, social environments, ways of thinking, and language use lead to different interpretations and associations for the same object. Linguists have pointed out that while many ethnic groups may focus on similar phenomena, each language expresses them differently, reflecting the unique culture and identity of that nation. Consequently, words gradually acquire specific cultural symbols and meanings. In addition, cultural connotation is context-dependent. When the communicative or cultural context changes, the connotative and semantic meanings of cultural vocabulary may also change accordingly (Li, Ran, & Xia, 2010, p. 695). Within the research, the definition of Wierzbicka (1997) is used as the principal basis for selecting cultural words from the mentioned coursebooks and a detailed analysis in terms of their meanings is done afterwards.

## **2.2. Types of cultural words**

The study chooses the thematic classification of Alonso & Ponte (2015, p.88). This classification is specific, detailed and helps readers easily recognize cultural vocabulary. Based on the theories proposed by Byram and Morgan (1994) as well as the framework of Council of Europe [CoE] in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (2001), the two researchers classify cultural vocabulary into twelve sub-topic groups.

Specifically, Byram and Morgan (1994) propose a three-dimensional model consisting of knowledge, attitudes, and behavior to evaluate the role of interculturality in foreign language learning. According to this model, learners need practical knowledge related to geographical, historical, ceremonial, and institutional realities in order to communicate successfully across cultures. Moreover, learners should develop positive attitudes toward foreign languages and people from different cultural backgrounds. In terms of behavior, intercultural competence involves not only politeness and appropriate etiquette but also the ability to interact effectively and appropriately in diverse cultural contexts.

Similarly, CEFR (2001) emphasizes the development of plurilingual and pluricultural competence, encouraging learners to use foreign languages flexibly and appropriately in multicultural settings. Based on these theoretical foundations, the researchers categorize cultural vocabulary into twelve specific sub-topic groups for analysis. The following is a specific division table:

**Table 1. Classification of cultural words by topic**

No	Topics	Subtopics
1.	<b>Every living</b>	<i>Food, work, school, holidays, leisure activities, clothes, home.</i> Example: spaghetti, Nordahl Grieg School, the game Civilization, high heels, skyscrapers

2.	<b>Cultural heritage</b>	<i>Monuments and celebrities, literature, TV shows, films, music.</i> Example: Steve Jobs, Made in America (book, film: Made in America), “The Lord of the Rings”, Yesterday Once More (song)
3.	<b>National Identity</b>	<i>The languages, religions, nationalities, histories, humor, arts and politics of different countries.</i> Example: Spanish, Australian, Buddhism, Monarchy, Expressionism
4.	<b>Popular Culture</b>	<i>Rituals, traditions, celebrations, festivals, social conventions, dance, religious norms and values, types of music.</i> Example: Jazz, values, Easter, ballet, worship
5.	<b>Society</b>	<i>Living standards, classes, urban groups, ethnic minorities, family structures, regional cultures and subcultures.</i> Example: video games creator, a social reporter, extended family, Asian American
6.	<b>Geography</b>	<i>Country, continent, city, town, street.</i> Example: America, Japan, Las Vegas, Wall Street
7.	<b>Stereotypes</b>	<i>Typical characteristics associated with certain cultures.</i> Example: Mainstream pop culture, native crafts, crop rotation
8.	<b>Languages</b>	<i>Borrowed words, formal idioms, colloquialisms.</i> Example: kindergarten, under the weather, core values, irreparable damage
9.	<b>Worldwide issues</b>	<i>Political, economic, social, and environmental issues.</i> Example: air pollution, a broken finance system, climate change, women rights
10.	<b>Institutions and organizations</b>	<i>Major agencies and organizations of different countries.</i> Example: Ethiopia Reads, World Bank, International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organization
11.	<b>Varieties</b>	<i>Words from other varieties of English.</i> Example: centre (British English)-center (American English), colour (British English)-color (American English), favourite (British English) - favorite (American English)
12.	<b>Social interaction</b>	<i>Greetings, apologies, politeness.</i> Example: How do you do? (Hello); See you later); Can I have a cup of tea, please? (Give me a cup of tea); I’m sorry for being late (I apologize for being late.)

### 2.3. The relation between the meaning of words and culture

The meaning of vocabulary has long been considered an important issue in linguistic research. According to Saussure (1916/2011), linguistic meaning is formed through the relationship between the signifier and the signified, in which words function as symbolic units representing concepts in human cognition. From a functional linguistic perspective, meaning is also closely related to the communicative functions performed by language in social contexts. Halliday (1994) argues that meaning is realized through language use and is created by the interaction between linguistic forms and communicative purposes. Therefore, vocabulary meaning is not only a static lexical definition but also the result of functional activities in communication.

In addition, many linguists emphasize that vocabulary meaning is deeply connected to cultural and social experience. Sapir (1921) and Whorf (1956) suggest that language reflects how different communities perceive and organize reality. Similarly, Wierzbicka (1997) explains that words often contain culture-specific meanings shaped by the historical and social experiences of a speech community. As a result, vocabulary embodies not only linguistic information but also shared cultural knowledge that is transmitted from one generation to another. This shared knowledge influences how reality is conceptualized and expressed through language.

From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, meaning extends beyond dictionary definitions to include conceptual and cultural dimensions. Lakoff (1987) and Langacker (1987) argue that meaning is grounded in human cognition and experience. In this sense, vocabulary meaning reflects how people mentally conceptualize the world around them. Cultural elements embedded in vocabulary, therefore, represent the worldview, values, and symbolic systems of a particular community. Cultural vocabulary often carries multiple layers of meaning, especially symbolic and connotative meanings that are shaped by specific historical and cultural contexts.

The symbolic layer of meaning is particularly important in the study of cultural vocabulary because it reflects the creativity and identity of a culture across different historical periods. However, this layer is also

highly abstract and difficult to identify because it is associated with imagination, cultural association, and contextual interpretation. According to Evans and Tyler (2017), cognitive linguistics views meaning as the result of conceptual organization, in which sensory experiences are transformed into mental representations and conceptual structures. Likewise, Jackendoff (1983) argues that human perception of reality is shaped by conceptual systems organizing sensory information into meaningful categories.

Concepts are, thus, regarded as psychological units reflecting the objective world in the human mind. The process of semanticization enables humans to form conceptual systems that organize knowledge and experience. In this regard, semantics cannot be separated from cognition and cultural expression. Ly (2005) also emphasizes that semantic systems are embedded within broader conceptual systems shaped by culture and cognition.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Pedagogical Setting**

The study focuses on describing the meanings of cultural words and characteristics of culture related to English-speaking countries and others were, therefore, revealed. Cultural words from 7 EFL coursebooks for English majors at a university were collected for analysis. The coursebooks were not published in Vietnam; however, these books were chosen as official ones for students who were studying at Faculty of English for their appropriate knowledge. The decision was approved by the Head of Language Skills Division and Dean of the Faculty. Here are the titles of the coursebooks:

1. Rachael Roberts (2008). *Premium - B1 level coursebook*. Pearson Education Limited. (subject: English 1; aim: developing students' skills of reading, speaking and listening)
2. Alice Oshima & Ann Hogue (2006). *Writing Academic English (Part 1)– 4<sup>th</sup> Edition*. Pearson Education Limited. (subject: English 1; aim: developing students' writing skill)
3. Alice Oshima & Ann Hogue (2006). *Writing Academic English (Part 2)– 4<sup>th</sup> Edition*. Pearson Education Limited. (subject: English 3; aim: developing students' writing skill)
4. Fiona Beddall & Megan Roderick (2018). *Gold Experience – 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Student's Book (B1+ Pre-first for Schools)*. Pearson Education Limited. (subject: English 2; aim: developing students' skills of reading, speaking and listening)
5. Alice Savage & Masoud Safiei (2007). *Effective Academic Writing 1 (The paragraph)*. Oxford University Press. (subject: English 2; aim: developing students' writing skill)
6. Debra Daise, Charl Norloff & Paul Carne (2011). *Q: Skills for Success – Reading and Writing 4*. Oxford University Press. (subject: English 3; aim: developing students' skills of reading and writing)
7. Sarah Cunningham & Johnathan Bygrave (2011). *Real life (Upper-intermediate) – Student's Book*. Pearson Education Limited. (subject: English 3; aim: developing students' skills of reading, speaking and listening)

#### **3.2. Design of the Study**

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design combined with quantitative statistical analysis to investigate cultural words in seven EFL coursebooks used for English-majored students at a university. Cultural vocabulary was systematically collected and classified into cultural subtopic groups based on the theoretical framework presented in the Literature Review. Statistical analysis was then conducted to determine the frequency and percentage distribution of each group, with the results presented in tables for clear comparison across the coursebooks. Subsequently, semantic analysis was applied to examine the meanings, cultural connotations, and historical-cultural features of the selected words, thereby revealing how cultural vocabulary reflects the identities, historical backgrounds, and social values of different nations and regions.

#### **3.3. Data collection and analysis**

Based on the theoretical framework presented in the Literature Review, criteria for identifying cultural words were established. Cultural words were defined as lexical items reflecting the history, beliefs, customs, lifestyles, values, institutions, or social practices of specific communities and nations. Using these criteria, cultural vocabulary was systematically collected from seven EFL coursebooks for English-majored students through the examination of reading texts, dialogues, vocabulary lists, and cultural notes. After removing repeated items, a total of 3,336 cultural words were identified.

The collected words were then classified into twelve cultural subtopic groups, including everyday living, cultural heritage, national identity, popular culture, society, geography, stereotypes, languages, worldwide issues,

institutions and organizations, varieties, and social interaction. Their frequencies were calculated and statistically summarized in Excel tables to illustrate the distribution of cultural vocabulary across the coursebooks.

Subsequently, qualitative semantic analysis was conducted to examine the meanings and cultural connotations of the selected words. Through contextual and comparative interpretation, the study explored how cultural vocabulary reflects the cultural identities, historical backgrounds, and social values of different countries and regions.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

### 4.1. Total number of cultural words in EFL coursebooks for English majors

After a long process of selecting and grouping, the total number of these words found in 7 EFL coursebooks is 3336. It is shown in the table below.

*Table 2. Cultural words in seven EFL coursebooks*

No	Name of the coursebook	Number of cultural words	%
1	Q-Skills for Success (Reading & Writing) 4	836	25.06%
2	Premium B1 Coursebook	669	20.05%
3	Writing Academic English (Part 2)	533	15.98%
4	Writing Academic English (Part 1)	405	12.14%
5	Effective Academic Writing 1	349	10.46%
6	Real life - Upper-intermediate	274	8.21%
7	Gold Experience (2 <sup>nd</sup> edition)-SB	270	8.1%
	<b>In total</b>	<b>3336</b>	<b>100%</b>

The book with the largest number of cultural words is named *Q-Skills for Success (Reading & Writing) 4* (836 words or 25.06%). The book focuses on the two skills of reading and writing with the target B2 (V-step); therefore, many words belonging to various cultural topics are found. *Premium B1 Coursebook* follows it with 669 words, accounting for 20.05%. In this book, a large number of cultural words on the topic of *Geography* are collected, mainly the names of continents, countries, and cities. The third position is for the book *Writing Academic English (Part 2)* with 533 words, or 15.98%. The coursebook is used for teaching students essays on different topics related to culture; sample paragraphs or essays are seen on the pages. The lowest place is for *Gold Experience (2<sup>nd</sup> edition)-SB* with 270 words, occupying only 8.1%. The book teaches students four skills of English; however, the words on cultural topics are not varied enough to make it stand in the top 3.

Here is another table illustrating cultural words of 12 topics in the EFL coursebooks mentioned above. The 12 topics are on culture, including Everyday living, Cultural heritage, National Identity, Popular culture, Society, Geography, Stereotypes, Languages, Worldwide issues, Institutions and organizations, Varieties, and Social interaction.

*Table 3. Cultural words of 12 topics in the EFL coursebooks*

No	Topic	No of words	%
1	Everyday living	220	6.59%
2	Cultural heritage	150	4.5%
3	National identity	162	4.86%
4	Popular culture	44	1.32%
5	Society	100	3%
6	Geography	358	10.73%
7	Stereotypes	131	3.93%
8	Languages	1888	56.59%
9	Worldwide issues	167	5%
10	Institutions and organizations	69	2.07%
11	Varieties	40	1.2%
12	Social interaction	7	0.21%
	<b>In total</b>	<b>3336</b>	<b>100%</b>

As can be clearly seen in the table, the topic *Languages* accounts for the largest number of cultural words, with 1,888 items or 56.59% of the total. Most of the vocabulary in this category consists of collocations formed by combinations of two or more words belonging to either similar or different parts of speech. The second

largest category is *Geography*, which includes 358 words, accounting for 10.73%. In this group, names of continents, countries, cities, and geographical locations appear most frequently. The topic *Everyday living* ranks third, with 220 words or 6.59%. In contrast, *Social interaction* represents the smallest category, with only 7 words, accounting for 0.21% of the total cultural vocabulary identified in the seven selected EFL coursebooks.

These findings suggest that the selected coursebooks place considerable emphasis on linguistic and geographical knowledge as important components of cultural learning in EFL contexts. The dominance of the *Languages* category may indicate that the coursebooks aim to familiarize learners with language-related expressions, naming systems, and culture-specific collocations that frequently appear in intercultural communication. This tendency also reflects the important role of language as both a communicative tool and a carrier of cultural identity.

Similarly, the relatively high proportion of geographical vocabulary demonstrates that cultural learning in the coursebooks is often introduced through references to places, countries, and regions. Such vocabulary may help learners broaden their global awareness and cultural knowledge of English-speaking and non-English-speaking countries. However, the strong focus on language and geography may also suggest that culture is mainly represented through factual and informational content rather than through deeper interpersonal and communicative dimensions.

In contrast, the very limited number of words related to *Social interaction* indicates that the coursebooks may not sufficiently emphasize culturally appropriate communication strategies, interpersonal relationships, or interactional norms in multicultural contexts. This imbalance could affect learners' intercultural communicative competence because successful communication requires not only knowledge about language and geography but also an understanding of social behaviors, cultural conventions, and interactional practices. Therefore, the findings imply that future EFL coursebooks should include a wider range of cultural vocabulary related to authentic social interaction in order to support learners' intercultural communication skills more effectively.

#### 4.2. Meanings of selected cultural words in the EFL coursebooks.

With the total number of cultural words found in the coursebooks, the meanings of selected typical ones from the books will be described and analyzed in detail. For each group of cultural words in the table above, several typical words are chosen for meaning analysis. Different meanings of the same word are clarified, and cultural meaning is typically emphasized so that characteristics of culture and history in many nations are discovered. Through describing the meanings of the chosen words for each group, inner features are revealed, which interest readers of the language.

##### *Everyday living*

For this subgroup, the word *apartment* is chosen for explanation. *Apartment* belongs to the subgroup: houses. According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2010), this word in American English has 3 meanings. The first meaning is “một số phòng để ở, thường trên một tầng của một tòa nhà”. The second meaning is as follows: “một số phòng dùng cho kỳ nghỉ” (e.g. self-catering holiday *apartments* - *căn hộ nghỉ dưỡng tự phục vụ*). In addition, this word is used in British English, meaning: “một phòng trong nhà, đặc biệt là ngôi nhà lớn hay nổi tiếng” (e.g. You can visit the whole palace except for the private *apartments* - *Bạn có thể tham quan toàn bộ cung điện, trừ các căn phòng riêng tư.*) In addition, the word *apartment* is also combined with some other words to create many phrases: *apartment block*: “một tòa nhà lớn có các căn hộ trên mỗi tầng”; *apartment hotel*: “khách sạn có nhiều căn hộ bạn có thể thuê trong khoảng thời gian ngắn hoặc dài”; *apartment house*: “một tòa nhà căn hộ nhỏ”. An example sentence containing the word *apartment* is *Maria unlocked the door to her tiny apartment (Maria mở cửa vào căn hộ nhỏ bé của cô ấy).*

*Apartment* also symbolizes, by a metaphorical mechanism, “sự độc lập và phát triển” (Renting his own *apartment* marked the beginning of Tom's journey towards independence and self-discovery - *Việc thuê căn hộ riêng của mình đánh dấu bước khởi đầu của hành trình về độc lập và tự khám phá của Tom.*) Or this word also symbolizes (metaphorically) “nơi trú ẩn cá nhân” (After a hectic day, returning to his *apartment* felt like entering a heaven where James could relax and recharge - *Sau một ngày bận rộn, việc trở về căn hộ của mình cảm giác như bước vào thiên đường, nơi mà James có thể thư giãn và nạp năng lượng.*) *Apartment* also symbolizes, by a metaphorical mechanism, “sự tự do” (Moving into her new *apartment* symbolizes Sarah's liberation from the constraints of her old life- *Dọn vào căn hộ mới của mình tượng trưng cho sự giải thoát của Sarah khỏi những hạn chế của cuộc sống cũ,* “sự khởi đầu mới” (Starting fresh in a different city, Emily felt a sense of renewal as she unpacked her belongings in her new *apartment* - *Bắt đầu mới tại một thành phố khác, Emily cảm thấy một sự đổi mới khi cô mở hành lý của mình trong căn hộ mới*) or “hoài bão, giấc mơ” (For

many, owning a luxurious *apartment* represents the fulfillment of lifelong dreams and aspirations - *Đối với nhiều người, sở hữu một căn hộ sang trọng đại diện cho việc thực hiện giấc mơ và hoài bão suốt đời*).

*Apartment* has a figurative, metaphorical meaning (about the main character's freedom and independence - “về sự tự do và độc lập của nhân vật chính”) in the following passage: “*As Emma unlocked the door to her cozy apartment, she felt a sense of liberation wash over her. Each step inside was a step away from the chaos of her past life. Here, in this modest space, she found solace and a newfound sense of independence. The walls whispered tales of resilience; the windows framed dreams yet to unfold. In this sanctuary, she wasn't just entering a living space; she was stepping into a realm of possibility, where every corner held the promise of a fresh start.*” In this case, *apartment* is not just a place to live, but also a symbol of independence and spiritual comfort (sự tự chủ và sự thoải mái tinh thần). Opening the door to the apartment marks a new beginning for the character, where she can escape the past and find peace and independence. This creates a metaphor for change and personal freedom that the apartment represents.

The study continues to discuss the mechanism of symbolic meaning transfer of *apartment*. Initially, the word *apartment* in English is used to refer to “căn hộ hoặc căn nhà tại một tòa chung cư”. However, in some other contexts or cultures, this word can be metaphorically transferred to refer to “một loại hình lưu trú tạm thời hoặc thuê nhà”. This can happen when a person uses the word *apartment* to refer to “một phòng trọ hoặc căn hộ nhỏ được thuê trong một khu vực cụ thể”. In addition, in some countries or territories, the word *apartment* can be metaphorically transferred to refer to “một loại hình chung cư hoặc căn hộ với các đặc tính cụ thể của nó”, which may differ from the official definition of this word in English.

#### *Cultural heritage*

However, the cultural meaning of this phrase cannot be fully understood through literal translation alone. To interpret the phrase appropriately, learners also need background knowledge about the film and its cultural significance in English-speaking countries. *The Lord of the Rings* is a film trilogy adapted from the famous fantasy novel written by J. R. R. Tolkien. Directed by Peter Jackson and produced by New Line Cinema, the series was released in three parts between 2001 and 2003. The films portray the journey of “The Fellowship of the Ring” to destroy a magical ring symbolizing absolute power and domination. The storyline highlights the conflict between good and evil in a fantasy world inhabited by humans, elves, dwarves, and hobbits. Understanding this cultural background allows learners to recognize that *The Lord of the Rings* is not merely a film title but also a cultural symbol associated with fantasy literature, heroism, friendship, sacrifice, and the struggle against evil. These symbolic meanings contribute to the cultural connotations embedded in the phrase. In addition, the global popularity and critical success of the film series, including multiple Academy Awards, demonstrate its significant influence on modern Western popular culture.

Therefore, analyzing this cultural expression helps learners develop not only vocabulary knowledge but also intercultural awareness. Through the phrase, learners can better understand how cultural products such as films reflect social values, collective imagination, and historical-cultural characteristics of English-speaking communities. Such understanding also supports learners in interpreting authentic materials, participating in intercultural discussions, and responding more effectively to culturally related tasks in language learning contexts.

#### *National Identity*

The authors analyze the meaning of the word *English*, which belongs to the subgroup of languages. According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2010), the primary meaning of *English* refers to the language spoken by British and American people (“tiếng Anh”). Grammatically, the word can function as both a noun and an adjective. Beyond its basic lexical meaning, however, *English* also carries important cultural and historical meanings associated with the development and global influence of the language.

Historically, English is classified as a West Germanic language within the Indo-European language family. Its earliest forms were spoken in England during the early Middle Ages. The name *English* originates from the Angles, one of the Germanic tribes that migrated to the British Isles. From the perspective of linguistic genealogy, English is closely related to Frisian and Low Saxon. Nevertheless, throughout its long historical development, English has been significantly influenced by French, Latin, and Old Norse in terms of both vocabulary and grammar (Crystal, 2003). English has become an international language widely used in politics, economics, science, education, and culture across the world. Therefore, the word *English* represents not only a linguistic system but also a cultural symbol of globalization and intercultural communication. Understanding the historical and cultural background of the language can help learners recognize its worldwide significance and its influence on international communication in modern society. An example sentence containing this word is: “*I've never heard English spoken so quickly.*” (Tôi chưa bao giờ nghe tiếng Anh được nói nhanh đến vậy).

*English* is used in such phrases as *English for Academic Purposes* (Tiếng Anh dùng cho mục đích học thuật) or *English for Specific Purposes* (Tiếng Anh chuyên ngành). Understanding the history of *English*, foreign language learners use that background knowledge for speaking, writing or answering quizzes about related cultural knowledge. In addition, the word *English* also has a second meaning as in the phrase the *English* (người Anh) or *Englishman* (“*An Englishman’s home is his castle*” - nhà người Anh chính là lâu đài của anh ta), *English woman* (phụ nữ Anh).

*English* is also used as an adjective and has other meanings when combined with a few words: *English breakfast* (also known as a full English breakfast. It is a cooked breakfast regularly served in the United Kingdom and Ireland, usually consisting of: bacon, sausages, eggs, black pudding, baked beans, tomatoes and mushrooms, toast and a beverage such as coffee or tea - *bữa sáng kiểu Anh*); *English horn* (a musical instrument with a brass tube and blown by the mouth to produce sound - *tù và kiểu Anh*); *English muffin* (a round, flat cake, toasted and served with butter - *bánh nướng xốp kiểu Anh*); *English bulldog* (a strong dog breed, short-legged, large-headed, short-necked - *chó bun*); *English Channel* (the sea between England and France, the English Channel - *Eo biển Anh*); *English daisy* (a small white flower with yellow pistils, often growing wild - *hoa cúc Anh*); *English foxhound* (a breed of dog with drooping ears and a short, smooth coat, usually black, white, and tan - *chó săn cáo Anh*). *English rose* (bông hồng nước Anh) has a symbolic meaning, based on the mechanism of metaphorical transference, referring to a girl with white skin and a typical English appearance. For example, in the following sentence: “*She is there. She was an English rose. She looks like an actress or opera singer.*” (Cô ấy đang ở đây. Cô ấy từng là bông hồng nước Anh. Cô ấy trông như diễn viên hay ca sĩ o-pê-ra.) (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 2010)

*English* has a symbolic, metaphorical meaning in several other phrases such as: *the English language* (in many cases, English does not only refer to language but also a symbol of culture, education and global power - *ngôn ngữ Anh*); *English tea* (In British culture, *English tea* is often considered a symbol of elegance, tradition and ceremony - *trà Anh*); *English gentleman/ lady* (describes an English man or woman often with the meaning of elegance, politeness and traditional style - *quí ông/ quí bà Anh*); *English countryside* (a symbol of the natural beauty and peacefulness of the English countryside - *vùng nông thôn của Anh*). These words are used to describe not only a cultural aspect but also the special values and traditions of the English people.

*English* carries a figurative meaning in the following passage: “*In the heart of the bustling city, amidst the cacophony of diverse tongues echoing through narrow alleyways, there existed a sanctuary – a quaint bookstore adorned with weathered signs bearing the words “Books in English.” Within its walls, time seemed to slow, as if the very essence of the English language whispered tales of distant lands and untold adventures.*” (Giữa lòng thành phố nhộn nhịp, giữa âm thanh hỗn độn của vô vàn ngôn ngữ vang vọng qua những con ngõ nhỏ hẹp, tồn tại một chốn bình yên – một hiệu sách nhỏ xinh với những tấm biển đã nhuộm màu thời gian mang dòng chữ “*Sách tiếng Anh*”. Bên trong những bức tường ấy, thời gian dường như trôi chậm lại, như thể chính linh hồn của tiếng Anh đang thì thầm kể những câu chuyện về những miền đất xa xôi và những cuộc phiêu lưu chưa từng được khám phá.) Here, *English* can be understood as a symbol of cultural exchange and new experiences. It not only refers to the language but also represents the connection and communication between different cultures. Finding a bookstore with books in *English* in a crowded city can be understood as discovering and reaching out to the wider world outside, opening up opportunities to explore new and innovative experiences.

In terms of the mechanism of meaning transfer, initially, the word *English* is often used to refer to the language and culture of the British (ngôn ngữ và văn hóa Anh), the people who use *English* in the United Kingdom (người Anh). However, the mechanism of metaphorical meaning transfer can occur when the word *English* is used to refer to the English language in general (ngôn ngữ Anh nói chung), regardless of the specific country or region. This occurs in an international context or when people want to talk about English as a global language (ngôn ngữ toàn cầu). In addition, *English* can also be metaphorically used to refer to the culture, education or social customs (văn hóa, giáo dục hay phong tục xã hội) that are considered part of the *English* language and culture.

### *Geography*

In this topic, the word *America* is clarified. *America* is a word in the subtopic: “châu Mỹ” (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 2010). This word has many meanings and also has cultural connotations. Understanding *America*, English learners will be more confident when presenting or writing about this topic. America is a large continent including North America and South America, where there is diversity in culture, history, geography and language. The narrow area connecting North and South America is Central America. North America includes the United States of America, Canada and Mexico, Latin America refers to the non-

English speaking countries of Central and South America, where the main languages used are Portuguese and Spanish. And Mexico is a part of Latin America. There is a saying about America: “*America is known for its diverse cultural landscape and rich history.*” (Châu Mĩ nổi tiếng về bức tranh văn hóa đa dạng và lịch sử phong phú) *Geographically and environmentally*, America includes a wide range of terrains from long mountain ranges like the Rocky Mountains in North America to tropical rainforests like the Amazon in South America. America has large rivers like the Amazon and Mississippi, as well as diverse ecosystems. In terms of *population and culture*, the Americas have a large and diverse population, with a wide range of ethnicities, including whites, Native Americans, blacks, and many indigenous groups. Cultural diversity comes from the intermingling of European, African, Asian, and indigenous cultures. In terms of *languages*, Spanish and Portuguese are the two official ones in most South American countries and some countries in Central America. Meanwhile, English is the official language in many countries in North America. In terms of *economy*, America has diverse economies, from highly developed economies like the United States and Canada to rapidly developing countries like Brazil and Mexico. Agriculture, industry, services and tourism are all important economic sectors. The *history* of America is diverse, from the pre-Columbian period with the presence of indigenous civilizations to the period of colonization and the war for independence. America has also experienced many revolutions and social upheavals, along with the development of unique folklore and art (Nguyen & Bui, 2020).

In addition to the meaning America – châu Mĩ, according to Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (2010), *America* is used to refer to *the United States of America, the States* or simply *America* (nước Mĩ), a country in North America (She emigrated to America in 1995 – Cô ấy di cư đến Mĩ năm 1995). Many people from other regions of America do not like the use of the word *America* to refer to *the US* but in fact this usage is quite common. In another context, *America* is also used to refer to the culture, the culture of *the United States* or *America* in general (nền văn hóa của nước Mĩ nói chung).

*American* refers to someone or something that originates from *the United States* (ai đó hoặc cái gì bắt nguồn từ Mĩ) (“*Do you have an American passport?*” - Bạn có hộ chiếu Mĩ không? or “*I’m not American, I’m Canadian*” - Tôi không phải người Mĩ, tôi là người Ca-na-đa.) *Latin American* (thuộc Mĩ La-tinh) and *South American* (thuộc Nam Mĩ) refer to other regions of the continent (*Latin American dance music* – nhạc nhảy Mĩ La-tinh; “*Quite a lot of South Americans study here*” – Khá nhiều người Nam Mĩ học ở đây.) There is an idiom: “*As American as apple pie*” – Mĩ như bánh nhân táo. *American English* (tiếng Anh Mĩ) refers to the language spoken in the United States. *American breakfast* (bữa sáng kiểu Anh) is a large breakfast consisting of cereal and cooked foods such as eggs and ham. *American cheese* (phô mai Mĩ) is an orange cheese, usually sold in slices wrapped in plastic bags. The *American dream* (giấc mơ Mĩ) refers to the values and social standards that people strive to achieve in the American tradition, such as democracy, equal rights and wealth. The *American eagle* (đại bàng Mĩ) is a white-headed, white-tailed bird that is the national symbol of the United States. And of course, *American football* (bóng bầu dục Mĩ) is a game played by two teams of 11 players each, using an oval ball that the players kick, throw, and handle. Each team tries to get the ball to the other team. *American Indian* (người Mĩ gốc Ấn) is a term used to refer to *Native American* (người Mĩ bản địa), of Indian descent (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 2010).

In the following passage, *America* is metonymic: “*As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting hues of orange and pink across the vast expanse of the landscape, she couldn’t help but feel a sense of awe. Standing there, amidst the rugged beauty of the wilderness, she felt like she was witnessing the essence of America itself – wild, untamed, and full of promise. It was a reminder of the pioneering spirit that defined the nation, a spirit that still burned brightly in the hearts of those who dared to explore its vast and diverse landscapes.*” (Khi mặt trời dần khuất dưới đường chân trời, nhuộm cả không gian rộng lớn bằng những gam màu cam và hồng rực rỡ, cô không khỏi cảm thấy choáng ngợp và đầy xúc động. Đứng giữa vẻ đẹp hoang sơ, hùng vĩ của vùng đất hoang dã ấy, cô có cảm giác như đang chứng kiến chính tinh thần cốt lõi của nước Mỹ – mạnh mẽ, tự do, chưa bị thuần phục và tràn đầy hy vọng. Khung cảnh đó gợi nhắc về tinh thần tiên phong đã làm nên bản sắc của quốc gia này, một tinh thần vẫn đang cháy bỏng trong trái tim của những con người dám khám phá những miền đất rộng lớn và đa dạng của nó.)

In the passage, the word *America* is a metonym, not only a specific place name but also represents a range of meanings and values about the country of America. The word *America* here does not only refer to a specific geography or country (địa lý hoặc quốc gia cụ thể) but also represents broader meanings. (1) The openness and potential of America (sự mở cửa và tiềm năng của Mĩ) is represented by the word *America*. This is a country built on the spirit of adventure and discovery, where people can find opportunity and potential for themselves. (2) The word *America* also represents the values of freedom and creativity (giá trị của sự tự do và sáng tạo). It

is associated with the meaning of *the American Dream* (Giấc mơ Mĩ), where people believe that they can achieve success and prosperity through personal effort and hard work. (3) The word *America* also evokes images of the beauty and diversity of the American landscape (hình ảnh về vẻ đẹp và sự đa dạng của cảnh quan Mĩ), from the wild countryside to the vibrant city. It is associated with the spirit of adventure and discovery (tinh thần phiêu lưu và khám phá), where people can find wonder and excitement.

In terms of metaphorical connotation, *America* was originally used to refer to the *continent America* (châu Mĩ), as well as *the United States of America* (nước Mĩ), a large and influential country worldwide. Because of the influence of the United States and its historical significance, America has become a symbol of freedom, progress, and power (sự tự do, tiến bộ và quyền lực) (metaphorical connotation). It is often used to refer to a mindset or value (tư duy hoặc giá trị), which is considered positive and ideal, such as *the American Dream* (giấc mơ Mĩ). *America* can also be used in political and cultural contexts to refer to issues and characteristics of the United States and American society in general (các vấn đề và đặc điểm của Mĩ hoặc xã hội Mĩ nói chung) (metaphorical connotation). For example, *Made in America* (Được sản xuất ở Mĩ) is used to refer to pride in domestic production and industry. The metaphorical connotation of *America* also reflects the personal views and perceptions of its users (quan điểm cá nhân và nhận thức của người dùng). For some people, *America* represents great power and influence (quyền lực và ảnh hưởng to lớn), while for others, it is synonymous with injustice and frustration (sự bất công và thất vọng).

## 5. Conclusions

The analysis identified 3,336 cultural words across the selected EFL coursebooks for English majors, demonstrating that cultural vocabulary constitutes a substantial component of the lexical content. These words were distributed unevenly across cultural subtypes and coursebooks, reflecting varying levels of cultural representation. Semantic analysis further revealed that cultural words embody historical, social, and cultural meanings specific to different nations and regions. While some words carry relatively fixed cultural meanings, others exhibit multiple denotative, connotative, and culture-specific interpretations depending on the communicative context. The findings highlight the dual role of cultural vocabulary as both a linguistic resource and a carrier of cultural knowledge. Therefore, understanding its semantic and cultural dimensions can enhance learners' interpretation of authentic materials, intercultural communicative competence, and appropriate language use in both academic and real-world contexts.

This study has several limitations. The semantic analysis focused on representative cultural words rather than the complete dataset, and the investigation was confined to coursebooks used for English majors at one university. As a result, the findings may not fully reflect the diversity of cultural vocabulary across EFL materials. Nevertheless, the study identifies key semantic and cultural patterns and contributes to understanding the relationship between language and culture in EFL education. Future studies should examine a broader range of coursebooks, educational contexts, and analytical approaches to enhance the generalizability and comprehensiveness of the findings.

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