

An Evaluation of Cultural Elements within Malaysian Year 1 English Textbooks: KSSR SK English Year 1 and CEFR Super Minds 1

^aRahmatullah Katawazai*, ^aMustafa Haidari, ^bNur Rabi'ah Binti Yahya, ^bLeonara Chin, ^bIzzaida Fadhyah Binti Che Ibrahim, ^bNur Muiezzah Binti Muhyidin & ^bShanti C. Sandaran

^aFaculty of Languages and Literature, Department of English Language and Literature, Kandahar University, Afghanistan
^bLanguage Academy, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 81310 UTM Johor Bahru, Johor, Malaysia

*First and Corresponding author: katawazairahmatullah@graduate.utm.my

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the cultural elements of the new Malaysian Year 1 English Textbook, CEFR Super Minds 1 in comparison to the old KSSR SK English Year 1 textbook from the perspectives of teachers. This study also investigates teachers' opinions regarding the inclusion of local and foreign culture(s) in the English textbooks and to identify their preferred textbook. The sample of the study is 30 English school teachers teaching Years 1 and 2 in Johor State, Malaysia. The current study used a mixed-method research design to carry out the research. The instruments used in this study were Likert scale checklist items and open-ended survey questions. The findings revealed that teachers who participated in the study preferred the old textbook, KSSR SK English Year 1 over the new CEFR Super Minds 1. However, teachers also believed that while elements of local culture are important and necessary, the inclusion of foreign culture is also needed for the students to be able to familiarize with others' global cultures and cultural diversity. The current study will help curriculum developers to include cultural elements in school textbooks in order to be suitable to social, religious, and cultural norms.

Keywords: Textbook evaluation, Cultural elements, Year 1 English Textbooks, Malaysia

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

In the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), choosing suitable material is very important for teaching and learning purposes and it is undeniable that the textbook has become the main source of information and knowledge to be used, especially in the foreign language classrooms. With the number of researchers have highlighted the importance of textbooks and the skills of English language learning presented in these textbooks (Katawazai et al., 2019) in language classrooms, there is a growing need to analyze whether the right textbook is being used for the right purpose in the classroom. Many studies have been conducted on textbook evaluation (e.g Demir & Ertas, 2014; Hermawan & Lia, 2012; Katawazai et al., 2019) across different contexts globally to examine its appropriateness of materials to learners, their cultures, and their social norms. With the constant changes and improvement of ELT in both inductive and cooperative methods of teaching (Ahmadzai et al., 2019; Katawazai & Saidalvi, 2020) and also in terms of the quality textbook materials (Katawazai et al., 2019) especially for the ELT teachers over the years, the process of selecting textbook material has become more challenging since many considerations from different aspects need to be considered. Looking at the Malaysian context, there have been changes over the years in the school curriculum which affect the educational goal(s). The changes made in the curriculum would mean a new set of textbooks since textbooks are predetermined by the Ministry of Education for both primary and secondary schools in Malaysia.

Recently, the Malaysian curriculum changed its last update in 2003. As well as in 2011, Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah (KSSR), or Primary School Standard Curriculum was firstly implemented as an effort to restructure and improve the current KSSR curriculum in line with the teaching and learning within the standards and challenges of the 21st century. With the emergence of KSSR, the Standards-Based English Language Curriculum (SBELC) was designed as well with significant changes in curriculum documents and organization. In 2013, The Language Council put forward the idea of adopting the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for the country. The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) was firstly introduced in Europe to provide a common basis for a shared language framework in the European Union (EU) to standardize its language education across Europe. The framework was then internationally recognized and has been adapted by many other countries outside of Europe, including Malaysia. The CEFR was also included as a part of the English curriculum when the KSSR Revised Version was implemented in 2017. A new textbook was designed based on the new revised KSSR curriculum. However, after one year of being in use, Malaysian schools were introduced with another set of textbooks in collaboration with Cambridge University Press, UK, as a part of the Common European Framework of Reference of ELT textbooks.

In Malaysia, the English language has been seen as a tool to develop and acquire knowledge (Thirusanku & Yunus, 2014). Malaysia has seen a positive trend in its standard of English language standard since 2013. From the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013

– 2015, it was reported that 28% of students got a minimum credit in the 2011 SPM English paper against Cambridge 1119 standards (Ministry of Education, 2013). Not only that, the Economic Planning Unit, (2016) reported that there has been an increasing English literacy level in Year 1 pupils from 50.1% to 63.3% in 2013 for the LINUS 2.0 Program that was introduced to overcome illiteracy in the English language. The National Grade Average for the English language in 2017 also shows better performance compared to 2016 as reported in the News Straits Times, 2018. With these many success stories, it would seem that the English language standard in Malaysia is high, but unfortunately, Malaysian employers consistently claimed that poor English language proficiency among fresh graduates is one of the top five challenges since 2006 (Ministry of Education, 2013). Rebecca reported in The Star Online (2016) in which the Malaysian Employers Federation revealed that the main reason for 200,000 unemployed graduates in Malaysia was due to poor proficiency in the English Language. Hence, it has become necessary for English language education in Malaysia to be revamped to successfully prepare the learners with the capability to use English Language appropriately. To this end, the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) has been introduced to the English language curriculum to boost the level of English language education in Malaysia. As a way to ensure quality English language education is delivered to the students, teachers who teach English need to be proficient in the English language and must pass the Cambridge Placement Test with at least a C1 level score. Those who did not meet the standard are required to undergo a course to improve their scores. Also, a set of imported textbooks that are CEFR-aligned has been introduced in stages to schools to replace the previously used textbooks under the KSSR curriculum. The introduction of the CEFR is to increase students' engagement with materials that are appropriate to their level. According to the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013 – 2025, with the implementation of CEFR with the current syllabi from pre-school to the secondary school levels, it is hoped that by 2025, 70% of students will achieve Cambridge 1119-equivalent minimum credit in English at SPM level, and thus, improving the standard of English language in Malaysia (Ministry of Education, 2013). In the current study, researchers undertake a comparison of the previously used KSSR SK Year 1 English Textbook and the CEFR aligned Super Minds Book 1. A general description of the two textbooks has been provided in the following sub sections.

The KSSR English Year 1 SK, the revised textbook was published by the Ministry of Education and widely used in Malaysia in 2017. The textbook is divided into 24 units and teachers are expected to cover all the units in one year. The textbook also addresses four modules such as Listening and Speaking, Reading, Writing, and Language Arts. Besides, the textbook also incorporates thematic units namely World of Self, Family and Friends, World of Stories, and World of Knowledge. In terms of its contents, the topics included in the textbook aimed at being age-appropriate and closely related to learners' daily life. Some of the topics include 'My Day in School, Nabil's Family, My Pet, Days of the Week, and My Hobby'. The textbook emphasizes the learning of phonetics where the learners will be able to develop their ability to hear, identify, and manipulate the individual sounds in words in each topic. Other than that, the textbook also highlights the local cultural elements as the main characters introduced in the textbook to represent different kinds of cultures in Malaysia such as Nabil (Malay), Jay Sen (Chinese), and Kiran (Indian). For the layout, the textbook is presented in color which is believed to attract learners' interest in learning the language. Apart from that, the illustrations are also included to facilitate learners' learning as they might help them in understanding certain words mentioned in the textbook. Moreover, the characters are illustrated in 2D drawings and wearing school uniforms which are similar to the learners themselves. Apart from that, the print font size and type are said to be appropriate.

The CEFR Super Minds Students' Book 1 was officially introduced to be implemented in the Malaysian classrooms in 2018. This textbook is published by Cambridge University Press. The textbook consists of 9 units and Year 1 and 2 learners use the same textbook throughout their years of learning. Year 1 covers the Topics 1 (At School) to 4 (Lunchtime) while Year 2 will cover Topics 5 (Free Time) onwards. The textbook also highlights the important language skills such as Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing, and Language Arts. For the content, the textbook is developed based on Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) which focuses on allowing learners to learn a subject through the medium of a foreign language. This means the textbook is not only used for teaching the language skills necessary for young learners but also to teach the content that is relevant to the learners. Examples of the content presented in the textbook include 'Free Time', 'Get Dressed', 'At the Beach' and 'Friends'. The CEFR Super Mind Students' Book 1 is made to look colorful and bright in order to attract learners' attention with layout of the content organized to enable learners to interact with the textbook easily.

Considering that culture and language are interconnected, there are many studies on textbook evaluation that focus on the cultural aspect of the textbook conducted in various global contexts (e.g. Ahmed & Nancy-Combes, 2011; Arslan, 2016; Shah et al., 2014). Looking at the Malaysian context, since the introduction of the Super Minds textbook is fairly recent, to the knowledge of researchers, there has been no research study conducted on the evaluation of the Super Minds textbook from the perspectives of teachers, though a few research studies have been conducted on the implementation of CEFR in Malaysia (Puteh-Behak et al., 2018; Uri & Abd Aziz, 2018). Since most of the issues concerning the imported textbook are the portrayal of cultural elements in the textbook, this study undertakes a comparative investigation of the cultural elements of the previously used KSSR English SK Year 1 Textbook and the currently used Super Minds Student Book 1 from the perspectives of teachers. Thus, looking into the perspectives of teachers, this comparative research on the cultural aspects would deem necessary to provide more insights on the portrayal of culture between the locally produced English textbook (KSSR English SK Year 1) and the imported CEFR textbook (Super Minds Student Book 1). The study aims to answer the following questions:

1. *What are the teachers' perspectives regarding the cultural appropriateness of the KSSR SK Year 1 textbook and CEFR Super Minds Students' Book 1?*
2. *What are the teachers' opinions about the inclusion of local and/or foreign culture in the English textbook?*
3. *What are the teachers' preferences of textbooks based on cultural elements in the two textbooks?*

■ 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Developing instructional materials for ELT textbooks need to be critically analyzed and checked by language scholars and curriculum developers. It means that the instructional materials or textbooks should be based on the needs of the learners and the norms and standards of the particular context and cultural aspects of the particular society. However, the cultural aspect and norms are sometimes ignored to be included in ELT textbooks. Shah et al. (2014) stated that the inseparable relationship between language and culture has been established by many theorists and the term ‘culture’ has been used widely by different people for different purposes.

If one take a look at what the culture in ELT actually is, it is needed to consider Adaskou et al’s (1990) (as cited by Shah et al., 2014) description of the term as follows:

- i. The aesthetic sense of culture or cultures with a capital “C” includes media, cinema, music, and literature.
- ii. The sociological sense culture or cultures with a small “c”. It includes the nature and organization of family, home life, interpersonal relations, material conditions, customs, and institutions.
- iii. The semantic sense culture (conception and thought processes).
- iv. The pragmatic sense culture (social skills, communication functions, appropriacy, etc.)

A study on the importance of knowing the process and how to select textbook materials conducted by Angell et al. (2008) posited that selecting materials for textbooks should be organized based on the consideration of the local context that meets the needs of any program. They also suggested that those responsible for textbook selection may find it helpful to stay abreast of major trends in foreign language pedagogy, teaching methodology, and technological developments. The authors also mentioned that there were possibilities that the profession may be as accustomed to accepting textbooks as complete curricular and instructional roadmaps that they may not examine the materials as rigorously as they should. Based on these statements, the current study hopes to contribute to the improvement in producing ELT materials and culturally appropriate textbooks.

Various aspects of the ELT textbooks in Malaysia and in other countries have been conducted. Rashid and Ibrahim (2018) looked at portrayal of culture in ELT textbooks. Using a content analysis, they found that the contents of the five textbooks they investigated seem to portray the social order and value system of the Judeo-Christian beliefs. A similar study by Rahim and Manan (2013) analyzed the representation of culture in English textbooks used in secondary classrooms in Malaysia. They found that they believe on some social influence represented in school textbooks such as ‘globalization’. A study conducted by Shah et al. (2014) who looked at representation of target culture in Pakistani ELT textbooks, designed by foreign authors for Pakistani learners, found that the foreign textbook failed in the part of understanding the cultural norms of the Islamic society of Pakistan and for this reason, it is somehow insensitive towards the social and cultural norms of the country. Aliakbari and Jamalvandi (2012) explored cultural aspects in the ELT textbooks in Chinese High Schools, and their results showed that the textbooks represented target culture and other cultures more than source culture. They explained that among the five major cultural elements, most emphasis was given to the category of religion, arts, and humanities under which are subcategories that include literature, arts, and music. The study shows that the cultural aspect in the Chinese high school textbooks were not balanced or suited to Chinese cultural norms. Similarly, Hermawan and Lia (2012) investigated three English books for primary schools in Indonesian context entitled “Grow with English”, book four to six published by Erlangga. Their findings indicate that the target culture is more commonly disseminated in the textbooks, while local (Indonesian) culture when present is presented appear in the reading passages in names for the characters, places, and locations and rituals. Drawing on previous studies, this study undertakes a comparison of cultural elements regarding these two textbooks used in the Malaysian primary schools, the KSSR SK English Year 1 and the new CEFR Super Minds 1.

■ 3.0 METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a mixed-method design, of quantitative and qualitative methods for data collection and analysis. The population of this study is English teachers who teach in SK primary schools in Malaysia. The researchers used purposive sampling method to gather the data. A total number of 30 teachers who are teaching Year 1 and Year 2 students participated in this study. All of the respondents are experienced in teaching English, ranging from less than five years of teaching experience to more than twenty-six years. The teachers are from both urban and rural schools.

The instrument used in this study is an online questionnaire that consists of close-ended and open-ended questions. Close-ended questions include demographic background and cultural evaluation on KSSR SK Year 1 English Textbook and cultural evaluation on CEFR Super Minds Student Book 1, while open-ended questions are about the perspectives of teachers regarding the two textbooks. For the close-ended questions, a five-point Likert scale was used to measure the perceptions of teachers towards both textbooks. The checklist was adopted based on (AbdelWahab, 2013; Demir & Ertas, 2014; Miekley, 2005). The reliability of the instrument has already been tested by the researchers. The five statements on cultural appropriateness are as follows:

1. The textbook is culturally appropriate.
2. The textbook presents different cultures.
3. The textbook is free from materials that might be offensive.
4. The topics in the textbook include elements of local culture.
5. The topics in the textbook include elements from the culture of the target language.

In addition, five open-ended questions were added for in-depth details on the teachers’ perceptions about the cultural elements of the two textbooks they use in their classrooms and their preferences.

The following are the open-ended questions;

1. What do you think about the cultural elements of the KSSR SK Year 1 book?
2. What do you think about the cultural elements of CEFR Super Minds Students' Book 1?
3. Do you think it is important for textbooks to include elements of Malaysian culture? Why? /Why not?
4. Do you think it is important for textbooks to include elements of Western culture? Why? /Why not?
5. Focusing on the cultural elements in both textbooks, which one is more suitable to be used in the Malaysian Year 1 classroom? Please elaborate.

The questionnaire was distributed using an online survey application at www.cognitofoms.com. The link of the questionnaire was shared with participants through two social media platforms: WhatsApp and Facebook. The responses of the respondents were automatically received after the respondents had completed answering them. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the results of the Likert scale, quantitative data. The mean and standard deviation were determined and analysed using SPSS 26.00. For the open-ended questions, the results were coded and common themes and patterns of the responses were identified and interpreted

■4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of both quantitative and qualitative data are discussed in this section. The study focused on teachers' perceptions about the cultural elements present in the the KSSR SK English Year 1 and the new CEFR Super Minds.

4.1 Teachers' perspectives regarding the cultural appropriateness of KSSR SK Year 1 textbook and CEFR Super Minds Students' Book 1

In this section, we present the findings of the teachers' perspectives on the cultural appropriateness of the textbooks based on the items in the questionnaire and the open-ended questions (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1 Comparison of teachers' perspectives on cultural appropriateness of KSSR SK Year 1 Textbook and Super Mind Students' Book 1

Statements	KSSR SK Year 1 English Textbook		CEFR Super Mind Students' Book 1	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1. The textbook is culturally appropriate	3.67	1.296	2.47	1.196
2. The textbook presents different cultures	3.47	1.074	2.77	1.223
3. The textbook is free from Materials that might be offensive.	3.87	1.106	3.57	1.165
4. The topics include element from local culture	3.40	1.404	2.03	1.066
5. The topics include element from foreign culture.	3.43	1.104	4.00	1.083

There are 10 items all together for both sections B and C in the questionnaire to measure the teachers' views of cultural appropriateness in both textbooks, which are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1-strongly disagree, 2-disagree, 3-neutral, 4-agree, and 5-strongly agree). Based on Table 4.1, the findings show that the participants generally possess a neutral view about the appropriateness of the cultural elements integrated in the KSSR SK Year 1 English Textbook but have a slightly negative view on the cultural appropriateness included in the CEFR Super Minds Students' Book 1. For statement 1, 'The textbook is culturally appropriate', the KSSR SK Year 1 Textbook yields a mean score of 3.67 as opposed to CEFR Super Mind Students' Book 1 with the mean score of 2.47. This shows that for statement 1, participants are more inclined towards the first textbook compared to the latter one.

From the open-ended responses, 13 teachers stated that the KSSR SK Year 1 Textbook is more culturally appropriate. For example, some of the responses given are "Some characters do depict local culture as they were drawn wearing traditional clothes", "All the terms used suit to the cultural elements and very suitable for our Malaysian children", "More appropriate. The clothing, customs or even the phrases are more familiar to the learners", and "It is more suitable to Malaysian students as it uses Malaysia cultures and simple words".

For statement 2, 'The textbook presents different cultures', the results show that the KSSR SK Year 1 Textbook has a mean score of 3.47 whereas CEFR Super Mind Students' Book 1's mean score is 2.77. It can be concluded that the participants have a slightly positive view that the KSSR SK Year 1 Textbook has different texts that incorporated various cultures in Malaysia, while for CEFR Super Mind Students' Book 1, participants slightly disagree with the notion of the textbooks containing different cultures. For example, in KSSR SK Year 1 Textbook, a teacher was reported to state that "Some characters do depict local culture as they were drawn wearing traditional clothes", and this can be seen from the characters in the textbook wearing different traditional clothes based on the different races available in Malaysia. In contrast to CEFR Super Mind Students' Book 1, the elements are not culturally diverse.

For both textbooks, the teachers gave a positive stand regarding the third statement, "The textbook is free from materials that might be offensive". For the first textbook, the mean score is 3.87, while for the second textbook, the mean score is 3.57. This indicates that both the

textbooks are not written with materials that are offensive to other cultures. For statement 4, “The topics include elements from local culture”, the KSSR SK Year 1 Textbook reports a mean score of 3.40, while for the CEFR Super Mind Students’ Book 1, the mean score is 2.03. This clearly shows that the local content is not included in the CEFR Super Mind Students’ Book 1 as the content focuses more on foreign culture. This can be seen from the open-ended responses of the participants: “*It lacks Malaysian context content which might be difficult for the students to relate during the learning process takes place*”, “*The elements are in a foreign context*”, “*The CEFR Super Mind Student Book 1 textbook focus more on the cultural elements of the European people...*” and “*More to foreign culture and the term used is too difficult to low proficiency learners*”.

For the final statement, “The topics include element from foreign culture”, the participants have a neutral view with the mean score of 3.43 for the first textbook. For the latter, its mean score is 4.00, which is a strong indicator for agreement about the foreign culture included in the textbook. This is further supported by participants’ open-ended responses: “*...learners get to know different places with different climates and famous landmarks...*”, “*The cultural elements is vast and covers some elements of culture from around the world*”, “*The elements are in a foreign context, and while it is good that these elements are exposed to learners since they’re learning the English language*”, and “*The CEFR Super Mind Student Book 1 textbook focus more on the cultural elements of the European people*”.

4.2 Teachers’ opinions about the inclusion of local and/or foreign culture in the English textbook

Table 4.2 Importance for English language textbook to include local or foreign cultural elements

Cultural elements	Frequency (n)			
	Yes	No	No Response	With Condition
Local	27	0	1	2
Foreign	20	5	2	3

When participants were asked whether it is important to include local or foreign cultural elements in the English language textbook, 27 participants responded that it is important for English language textbooks to contain elements of local culture, 1 participant did not provide any response, while 2 participants stated that local cultural elements are indeed important, but some space for foreign cultural elements should also be provided to learners as a mean for knowing about global cultural diversity. For example, a participant responded “*I think it is important to include elements of local culture. However, the focus shouldn’t only be just that. It should also include other cultures around the world to make it more interesting for students as a lot of students are familiar with the local culture so there is little room for inquiries*” while another participant mentioned, “*It is important however the mix of international culture is also essential*”. This idea is also further supported by Stevick (1982) who mentioned that both the target language and its culture as well as the learners’ own language and the culture have great influences and should be simultaneously present in order to create more meaningful language learning.

On the other hand, 20 participants mentioned that foreign cultural elements are important to be included in the textbook, while 5 participants disagree with it. While 2 participants did not provide their responses, but 3 other participants responded positively with certain conditions. A participant mentioned that he was not against the idea of including elements of foreign culture in the textbooks, but it should be introduced in secondary level in order to let young learners enjoy their childhood by exposing them to their own surroundings (familiar culture). Another two participants suggested that foreign cultural elements can be included in the Level 2 of primary school as at this stage, learners are more matured to be able to compare and contrast the local and foreign cultures, and their language comprehension is also better.

4.3 Teachers’ preference of textbooks based on cultural elements

Table 4.3 Teachers’ preferences of textbooks based on cultural elements

	Frequency (n / %)
KSSR SK Year 1 Textbook	18 / 60.0
CEFR Super Mind Students’ Book 1	6 / 20.0
Undecided	6 / 20.0

Participants were also asked which textbooks are suitable in terms of cultural appropriateness for using in their classrooms. From the results, it was found out that 18 participants viewed that KSSR SK Year 1 Textbook is appropriate to be used whereas 6 participants remained with the current textbook which is CEFR Super Mind Students’ Book 1. However, 6 participants were undecided on which textbooks are more suitable for their own use. For participants who agree with KSSR SK Year 1 Textbook as the textbook which is more appropriate based on cultural elements, the reasonings gained from the open-ended responses from the questionnaire are as follow: *i) this textbook is more culturally appropriate with the learners and the learners will feel more comfortable to learn about local culture rather than facing a foreign culture that they have no idea with, ii) the events in this textbook is more relatable for the learners as they already*

have early exposure towards the local culture. However, for those who choose for CEFR Super Mind Students' Book 1, the reasons for their choice is because i) there is wider coverage of topics that can provide more exposure to learners about the cultures around the world, ii) it also provides room for discussion based on the cultures exhibited in the textbook and some of them can be seen in other sources such as through media, and iii) even if the foreign cultural elements are present, teachers can decide to adopt and adapt the elements to suit the teaching and learning sessions. Lastly, for those who were undecided about which textbook is preferred for using in the classrooms, the participants' shared the same opinion that the new textbook should contain both local and foreign cultural elements to make it better for our learners.

5.0 CONCLUSION

This study focused on the evaluation of cultural elements within Malaysian Year 1 English Textbooks "KSSR SK English Year 1" and "CEFR Super Minds 1". The evaluation of the textbook included cultural appropriateness, the relevance of the materials to the learners' culture, the diversity of the cultures presented in the textbook, the topics included in the textbook, the importance of cultural elements in the textbook, and the suitability of the textbook to be used in Malaysian Year 1 classrooms. The finding of this study offered some evidences that Malaysian English Language teachers favor the previous "KSSR English Year 1" textbook compared to the "CEFR Super Minds 1". The KSSR English Year 1 textbook has met the expectations of the teachers in terms of its cultural elements. The respondents have slightly positive views that the KSSR SK Year 1 textbook has greater cultural elements incorporated that reflect the diverse culture in Malaysia. On the other hand, there is still a tendency for the "CEFR Super Minds 1" to be accepted by the respondents. Focusing on the learners' additional knowledge, most of the respondents agreed that some exposure to other global cultures is important. It is also observed that the cultural focus or content in both textbooks was totally contrary. The old "KSSR English Year 1" textbook has more local cultural elements compared to "CEFR Super Minds 1". It is vital to focus on the local cultural aspects as it can allow the students to familiarize themselves with their own culture. On the other hand, the syllabus that has been provided in the "KSSR English Year 1" textbook is found to be outdated. Contrary to 21st Century Skills implemented by the Ministry of Education, this textbook is not appropriately helpful to the students to think and reason critically towards the global and international issues and cultural diversity. Meanwhile, the "CEFR Super Minds 1" textbook is more aligned with the 21st Century Skills and as well as globalized cultural diversity.

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