

Healthy food discourse in language learning: analysing nutritional content in ELT materials

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Abstract. This study examines the representation of healthy food discourse in English Language Teaching (ELT) textbooks, addressing the intersection of language education and nutritional awareness. As ELT materials play a crucial role in shaping learners' linguistic and cultural knowledge, understanding how they present health-related content is vital. The research aims to analyze the explicit and implicit messages about healthy eating in ELT textbooks, evaluate the integration of nutritional information with language learning objectives, and explore potential cultural biases in food representation. Employing a qualitative approach, this study utilizes critical discourse analysis to examine ELT textbooks Bahasa Inggris: Work in Progress untuk SMA/SMK/MA Kelas X published in 2022 by Indonesian ministry of education. The methodology involves systematic content identification and multi-layered discourse analysis. The findings reveal varied approaches to healthy food representation, cultural disparities in nutritional content, and the extent of alignment between food-related discourse and current health guidelines. The implications of this research could inform future ELT material development, enhancing the integration of health literacy within language education. This study contributes to the growing field of content-based language instruction and provides insights into the broader sociocultural impacts of ELT materials on learners' health awareness. In the end, an activity is proposed for students to experience a vibrant sample of ELT materials on food and health that are discussed throughout the article.

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1 Introduction

In recent decades, the integration of real-world issues and content into English Language Teaching (ELT) materials has become an essential trend in language education. This shift is driven by the desire to make language learning more meaningful and contextually relevant to learners [1], while also promoting the development of critical thinking skills. Among the various thematic areas explored in ELT, food-related discourse has emerged as a prominent topic. Food is not only a universal cultural practice, but it is also central to discussions of health, sustainability, and ethics—topics that are gaining traction globally. However, while food-based materials in ELT often center on cultural or conversational aspects, there is a significant research gap regarding the nutritional content and health discourse embedded in these materials [2-3]. This gap is especially important considering the global rise in diet-related health issues such as obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease [4].

Despite the ubiquitous presence of food-related content in language education, few studies have systematically analyzed the nutritional information and underlying health messages conveyed to learners. This absence of critical analysis raises important questions about the types of nutritional narratives learners are exposed to, particularly in a global context where food and health have become highly politicized and commercialized topics. Nutritional discourse in educational materials may not simply be a neutral subject matter but may carry implicit biases, ideologies, and values that reflect broader socio-economic and cultural paradigms [17]. This study aims to fill this research gap by critically examining the portrayal of food, nutrition, and health in ELT materials, and by exploring how these materials align—or fail to align—with contemporary public health guidelines.

1.1 The Role of Food in Language Learning

Food is an integral part of human culture, and its inclusion in language education has both pedagogical and practical benefits. Teaching materials that incorporate food-related topics not only provide opportunities for engaging lessons but also help students relate language learning to their daily lives. Additionally, food can serve as a medium for teaching various linguistic structures, such as vocabulary, grammar, and pragmatics. For example, lessons on food can introduce vocabulary related to ingredients, cooking methods, and dietary preferences, while also offering opportunities to practice structures such as imperatives (“Chop the onions”) or conditionals (“If you want to make a salad, you’ll need fresh vegetables”) (Crawford, 2013).

Moreover, food discussions in ELT classrooms offer a window into cultural practices, enabling learners to compare and contrast their own food traditions with those of other cultures. This cross-cultural exchange not only enriches students’ understanding of global food cultures but also fosters empathy and intercultural competence [17]. ELT materials often portray food as part of everyday life, making it a common topic in textbook dialogues, reading passages, and exercises. Yet, while food-related themes are widely used for their versatility, there has been little attention to how these materials address nutrition and health.

1.2 The Missing Nutritional Discourse in ELT Materials

Although food is frequently featured in ELT materials, the discourse surrounding nutrition and health is often underdeveloped or oversimplified. Research suggests that many language textbooks and learning resources prioritize surface-level discussions of food, such as favorite dishes, recipes, and restaurant dialogues, without delving into more complex discussions of nutritional value, dietary guidelines, or food’s relationship to health (Harwood, 2014). As a

result, learners may encounter food-related language that is disconnected from the contemporary public health concerns that dominate global discourse on diet and nutrition.

Public health scholars have raised concerns about the need for better nutritional education, particularly in light of rising obesity rates and diet-related illnesses worldwide [4]. The World Health Organization (WHO) and other health bodies have stressed the importance of promoting balanced diets, encouraging physical activity, and reducing the consumption of unhealthy foods, such as those high in sugar, salt, and saturated fats [5]. Yet, these health messages are largely absent from the food discourse presented in many ELT materials.

For instance, a content analysis of popular ELT textbooks conducted by Tomlinson [4] found that while food-themed lessons were common, few included substantive discussions on nutrition. Lessons often framed food in terms of personal preference or cultural expression, without linking these themes to health outcomes or nutritional awareness. This lack of focus on nutrition is concerning given the important role education plays in shaping learners' knowledge and attitudes toward food. Students, particularly those in younger age groups, are highly influenced by the messages they encounter in educational settings, and these messages can shape their perceptions of healthy eating [4].

1.3 The Influence of Food Marketing and Ideology

Another layer of complexity in the nutritional discourse of ELT materials involves the potential influence of food marketing and corporate interests. Some researchers argue that food-related content in educational materials may inadvertently reflect the commercial interests of the global food industry, which often promotes highly processed, calorie-dense foods [6]. This ideological framing can manifest in subtle ways, such as the normalization of unhealthy eating habits or the promotion of certain food products over others.

For example, in a study examining the cultural and commercial content of ELT textbooks, Kim [6] found that Western fast food brands were often presented as culturally neutral or desirable, with little critical discussion of their health implications. This suggests that the discourse around food in ELT materials may be shaped by larger commercial forces that prioritize profit over public health. The absence of critical nutritional discourse in these materials could thus reflect broader patterns of ideological influence, where the promotion of certain foods aligns with corporate interests rather than public health priorities [3], [6].

1.4 The Need for Critical Nutrition Discourse in ELT

Given the increasing prevalence of diet-related health issues worldwide, it is crucial that ELT materials reflect contemporary understandings of nutrition and promote healthy eating habits. Language educators have a responsibility to not only teach linguistic structures and vocabulary but also to promote critical thinking and media literacy. As part of this mission, teachers should critically evaluate the nutritional content presented in their materials and consider how this content may influence learners' attitudes toward food and health.

There is a growing body of research that advocates for the integration of critical health literacy into language education, where students are encouraged to question the health messages they encounter in both educational and media settings [7]. By fostering a more critical approach to food and nutrition discourse, language educators can help students develop a deeper understanding of how their food choices impact their health, while also equipping them with the language skills needed to navigate health-related conversations in English [7].

Despite the widespread inclusion of food in ELT materials, there remains a significant gap in research on how these materials address nutrition and health. Existing studies have largely focused on the cultural and linguistic aspects of food discourse, with little attention

to the nutritional content conveyed to learners. This study seeks to fill this gap by critically analyzing the representation of food and nutrition in a selection of contemporary ELT materials. Specifically, it will explore the extent to which these materials align with public health guidelines and whether they promote or undermine healthy eating habits.

By addressing this research gap, the present study aims to contribute to the broader conversation on health literacy in education, while also offering practical recommendations for the development of ELT materials that promote both language learning and nutritional awareness.

2 Material and Methods

This study employs a qualitative research approach, specifically utilizing discourse analysis to examine the representation of healthy food in English Language Teaching (ELT) textbooks. This method allows for an in-depth exploration of how language constructs meanings, attitudes, and ideologies surrounding nutrition and healthy eating within the context of language learning materials. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select ELT textbooks for analysis. The book under the investigation entitled “Bahasa Inggris: Work in Progress untuk SMA/SMK/MA Kelas X” published by Pusat Perbukuan Badan Standar, Kurikulum, dan Asesmen Pendidikan Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi in 2022. The authors include Budi Hermawan, Dwi Haryanti, Nining Suryaningsih. The ISBN of the book is 978-602-244-896-9. The book is written using Noto Serif 12/18pt., and Steve Matteson xviii. The book consists of 182 pages, and the size is 17.6 X 25 cm.

The textbook was systematically examined to identify all content related to food, nutrition, and healthy eating. This included textual content (e.g., reading passages, dialogues, vocabulary lists), visual content (e.g., images, infographics, charts), activities and exercises related to food and nutrition. Visual elements were described in detail to capture their contribution to the overall discourse. The study employs a multi-layered approach to discourse analysis, drawing on Fairclough's [8] three-dimensional model, textual analysis, discursive practice analysis and social practice analysis. Textual Analysis deals with examination of vocabulary choices, grammatical structures, and textual organization related to food and nutrition. Besides, identification of recurring phrases, metaphors, or linguistic patterns in discussing healthy eating are also examined.

Discursive Practice Analysis includes analysis of how food-related content is produced, distributed, and consumed within the textbooks. It also deals with examination of intertextuality and interdiscursivity in relation to nutritional information. Meanwhile, social practice analysis explores broader sociocultural contexts influencing the representation of healthy food. This aspect also considers the potential ideological implications of food discourse in ELT materials. Detailed analysis of selected passages was conducted to examine explicit and implicit messages about healthy eating, representation of cultural diversity in food choices, integration of nutritional information with language learning objectives, and potential biases or assumptions in food-related discourse.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Language Framing Healthy Eating

The chapter presents a normative discourse around food that aligns with Western health standards. Terms like "real food," "processed food," and "healthy eating" carry ideological assumptions. For instance, processed foods are portrayed negatively, emphasizing their

artificiality and lack of nutrients. This language shapes readers' perceptions, linking natural or unprocessed foods to health and well-being, while processed foods are seen as inherently unhealthy.

For example, "Eat Real Food, Not Processed Food" frames unprocessed foods as the ideal, using a binary distinction between "real" and "processed" that implicitly delegitimizes processed foods. This creates a value-laden message where certain foods (usually linked to modern, industrialized food systems) are viewed as inferior. The imperative language (e.g., "Stop Eating Before You Are Full") reflects a prescriptive tone that directs the behavior of readers, positioning the authors as experts and authority figures on healthy eating.

3.2 Cultural Representation of Foods

While the chapter includes some local foods (such as Gado-Gado and Tinutuan), the nutritional advice itself seems rooted in global, Westernized standards of health. Foods like "granola bars," "sports drinks," and "beef jerky" are examples drawn from Western consumerism. This presents a form of cultural dominance where local diets are implicitly compared to Western food norms. Although the text references local foods, they are not discussed within the same nutritional framework, which may suggest that global standards are the ideal. The section could be critiqued for marginalizing traditional eating habits and promoting a hegemonic view of "health" that aligns with Western standards.

3.3 Discourse of Individual Responsibility

The text constructs health as an individual responsibility, reflected in phrases like "cook more than eating out" and "drink water and forget everything else." This discourse emphasizes self-control, personal discipline, and individual choices as the key factors in maintaining health. It ignores structural issues such as economic barriers, cultural food practices, or societal influences on food availability and choices. The consistent emphasis on individual choice in controlling food consumption (e.g., "stop eating before you are full" and "eat at the dining table") shifts the responsibility of health entirely onto individuals, without acknowledging factors like food accessibility, socio-economic status, or food marketing practices that might limit these choices.

3.4 Power and Authority in Nutritional Advice

The text reflects the authoritative voice of public institutions (in this case, the Indonesian Ministry of Education) and experts. The instructional objectives frame the content as knowledge that students must absorb and replicate through various tasks (e.g., creating their own healthy eating challenge). The tone of the text suggests a power dynamic where the institution sets the rules for what constitutes healthy eating, and the students are expected to follow and reproduce these rules. The language creates a hierarchical relationship, positioning the curriculum (and by extension, the government) as an authority on what is "right" or "wrong" when it comes to food choices. This could limit critical engagement with alternative perspectives on nutrition and food systems.

3.5 Social Identity and Norms

The text also subtly reinforces social norms about body image and health. For example, the section "It is OK (and healthy) to stop eating while you still have some room in your stomach" ties health to restraint, linking healthy eating with a moral imperative of moderation and self-

control. This may reflect broader societal pressures about body image, eating habits, and thinness as an ideal. The focus on food as a pathway to physical health (and by extension, self-worth) might indirectly promote certain body standards and reinforce the idea that thinness or controlled eating equates to health.

3.6 Exclusion of Structural Factors

While the text provides practical tips on eating habits, it largely ignores larger societal factors such as food insecurity, poverty, or the role of the global food industry in shaping food availability and consumption patterns. For example, the recommendation to "cook more than eating out" assumes that individuals have the time, resources, and skills to prepare meals regularly, which may not be the case for everyone.

4 DISCUSSION

4.1 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as described by Fairclough [8], analyzes how language reflects, constructs, and sustains social power dynamics. In the "Healthy Foods" chapter, the discourse promotes a particular view of food and health that aligns with globalized, often Western, standards of nutrition. The use of imperative language (e.g., "Eat real food, not processed food") places a strong emphasis on individual responsibility and self-regulation, which reflects broader neoliberal ideologies in health discourse. This aligns with Fairclough's [8] assertion that educational materials often normalize dominant ideologies, making them appear as common-sense truths.

Previous studies, such as Machin and Mayr [9], have pointed out that health discourses in educational settings often present students as passive recipients of expert knowledge. Similarly, the "Healthy Foods" chapter gives prescriptive advice without inviting students to critically engage with the information, thereby reinforcing a top-down approach to health education [10].

4.2 Health Communication Theories

The chapter aligns with models such as the Health Belief Model (HBM) and Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), which focus on changing individual behaviors through information and self-efficacy. By emphasizing the benefits of cooking at home and avoiding processed foods, the text promotes health-conscious behavior change, a central tenet of these models [11]. However, as Nutbeam argues, health communication often neglects the broader social determinants of health, such as socioeconomic status and access to healthy foods [12]. This is evident in the chapter's lack of attention to structural barriers that might prevent students from following its advice, such as food insecurity or economic limitations.

Additionally, Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory emphasizes the role of social interaction and observational learning in behaviour change [13]. The collaborative activities, such as group discussions and peer feedback on healthy eating, reflect SCT's focus on learning through modelling and social engagement.

4.3 ELT and Language Learning Theories

From an English Language Teaching (ELT) perspective, this chapter integrates elements of task-based learning and the communicative approach [14]. Task-based learning encourages

students to use language in context, as seen in activities that involve writing procedure texts about healthy eating or conducting peer interviews. Such tasks promote meaningful communication, a key principle in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) [15].

However, research on developing sociolinguistic context-based English-speaking highlights the need for language learning materials to incorporate and validate local cultures [16]. A study by Adam and Pratolo also suggested similar issue [17]. The "Healthy Foods" chapter, while including some local dishes like *Gado-Gado*, primarily draws on globalized health discourses, which may not fully reflect students' cultural realities. This critique aligns with Gray, who argues that many ELT materials prioritize Western norms, marginalizing local cultural contexts in the process [18].

4.4 Studies on Educational and Health Ideologies

Apple's work on educational ideologies posits that curricula often reflect the values of dominant social groups [19]. The "Healthy Foods" chapter aligns with this, as it promotes a globalized view of health that may not be accessible or relevant to all students. The recommendation to "cook more than eating out" assumes that students have the resources to do so, which may not be the case for all learners, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds [20].

Ding and Saunders have critiqued how health is often framed in educational texts as a static, universal concept [21]. Similarly, the "Healthy Foods" chapter provides rigid guidelines on what constitutes healthy eating, without engaging students in a discussion about how these guidelines may be influenced by social, cultural, or economic factors.

4.5 Globalization and Localization in ELT Materials

Mackenzie argues that ELT materials are often shaped by global discourses that do not necessarily align with local realities [22]. The "Healthy Foods" chapter reflects this phenomenon by promoting Western nutritional ideals while minimally engaging with local food cultures. This can limit students' ability to critically evaluate global health discourses within their own cultural context. Kubota [23] emphasizes the importance of critical pedagogy in ELT, suggesting that materials should encourage students to question dominant ideologies, which is a missed opportunity in this chapter.

The rest of this chapter proposes a classroom task to promote student learning through an exploration of food and wellbeing across cultures.

A Proposed Classroom Activity: Global Food and Health Quest

The aim of this task is to engage students in discussing food and health issues from an international perspective, including specific insights on Indonesia and Japan, while promoting teamwork, critical thinking, and moments of silent reflection. The materials needed include the following:

- A world map or globe
- Index cards with food items from Indonesia, Japan, and other countries
- Fact sheets with health benefits and nutritional data for each food item
- Markers, coloured pencils, or crayons
- Large paper or poster board for group presentations
- 'Quest passport' handouts (a simple sheet for collecting stamps/initials)
- A timer (of any kind)

Below is the procedure to guide students through this task.

Step 1: Silent thinking (10 minutes)

Begin by inviting students to quietly think how different cultures address nutrition and health, with a focus on comparing Indonesia with another culture such as Japan to highlight their unique culinary practices and health philosophies.

Step 2: Silent Reading and Reflection (5 minutes)

Distribute fact sheets on Indonesian and Japanese foods to each group. Give students 5 minutes of quiet time to read and reflect on the materials individually. They can jot down thoughts, interesting facts, or any questions that arise during their silent reading.

Step 3: Forming Teams (5 minutes)

Divide the class into small groups of 4-5 students. Each group will act as researchers on their global food quest. This search may involve gathering information individually and in silence.

Step 4: Food Item Stations (30 minutes)

Set up several food stations around the classroom, including one for Indonesia and one for Japan, along with other countries. Each station should include:

An index card with a traditional food item, such as:

Japan: Sushi, Miso Soup, or Ramen

Indonesia: Nasi Goreng, Satay, or Gado-Gado

A fact sheet detailing the health benefits and nutritional information of each food item.

Students will rotate between stations, spending about 5 minutes at each. As they explore, they should think quietly about what they learn from each station and how it connects to their previous readings.

Step 5: Silent reflection break (5 minutes)

After the rotation, allow another 5 minutes of silent reflection. Ask students to think about the following prompts and jot down their thoughts:

- What new insights did you gain about the foods from Indonesia and Japan?
- How do the health benefits of these foods compare to what you typically eat?
- What cultural values are reflected in the eating practices of these countries?

Step 6: Quest quiz (15 minutes)

Hold a quiz based on the information gathered at the stations. Create true/false questions or multiple-choice questions related to the food items and their health aspects. Each correct answer earns a stamp in their 'Quest Passport.'

Step 7: Group discussion and presentation preparation (20 minutes)

Students will discuss their findings in their groups, using their notes and reflections from the silent thinking sessions. They should prepare a short presentation (5-10 minutes), focusing on one or two selected food items from Indonesia or Japan. Encourage them to incorporate ideas from their silent reflections into their presentations.

Step 8: Presentations (30 minutes)

Each group presents their findings to the class, focusing on the cultural and health aspects of the foods they selected from Indonesia and Japan. Allow time for questions and discussion after each presentation.

Step 9: Class reflection and wrap-up (10 minutes)

Conclude the activity with a class discussion. Ask students to share any surprising findings or insights about food and health. Encourage them to share how the silent thinking parts helped deepen their understanding.

Step 10: Extension activity (optional)

For homework or extra credit, ask students to try preparing a recipe from Indonesia or Japan at home. They should document their experience in a short reflection, considering the food's health benefits and any challenges faced during preparation.

By integrating silent thinking into the 'Global food and health quest,' students can engage more deeply with the material, allowing for personal reflection and internal processing. This structured downtime enhances their understanding of food and health from an international perspective, fostering a richer discussion and engagement during group presentations. Below is an explanation why some silent learning strategies are incorporated into this cognitively demanding and reflective tasks. Such quiet space is needed in steps 1, 2, 5, 6, and 9 of the activity. This particular need will be well connected into the relevant discourse of classroom pedagogy in section 6 that follows.

Why the silence space is needed

In recent years, there has been more awareness of silence due to the rise in popularity of mindfulness and meditation for and within education as an activity [24]. Silence allows one to explore and discover potentials one might not have known before [25--31]. The quiet space allows one to express voices and choices [32] as well as personal decisions [33-36].

Silence provides a safe space for productive activities [37]. Petrova [38] advocates the richness of what silence means and what it does in social contexts. Silence allows sharing communication space [39]. Silence does not mean that someone is entirely mute [40-41]. Since social communication is heavily monitored by the inner formulation system, focusing on speech production alone would only partially understand social communication [42]. Silence helps reduce anxiety relating to others during social communication and interpersonal relationships [43-45].

Silence is part of an internal dialogue between the listener and the speaker [46]). While being attentive to someone else's verbal contribution, the listener not only tries to comprehend the message but also quietly interacts with that message. In addition, partners in a conversation might absorb each other's behaviour to some extent [47]. For example, someone who knows how to inspire and lead a discussion can help an introvert open up more effectively than someone who does not know how to do so.

Silence is deeply situational. How much someone needs to use silence varies according to communicators' personalities, sociocultural climate, and the cognitive load of communicative content [48-49]. For example, those who are highly verbal in their mother tongue can be very quiet when it comes to foreign languages [50]. Similar to talk, silence is not context-free [51]. If words need to be socioculturally appropriate depending on who, where, when, what role, and what content, silence as part of language also shares similar needs for one to be welcome, accepted, valued, and understood rather than to cause confusion and misinterpretation.

Research by Bosacki and Talwar [52], Bao [53] as well as Zebdi and Monsillion [54] shows that silence supports the need for mutual listening. Scholars such as Alerby and Brown [55], Takahashi [56], and Takahashi [57] have highlighted the need for teachers to be thoughtful about who need to speak and who stays quiet. Harumi [58] suggests that

sometimes it may be helpful to allow writing, rather than speaking, to ease tension among those who are not ready to articulate their thoughts. Shachter [59] suggests building a social network and a support system to help students increase their self-esteem and fight depression. Empirical research by Bao [60] also attributes silence to respect and self-modesty. Besides, silence has become the art of being truthful. It is through silence that art presents us with a way to approach truth and knowledge that has a non-necessary relation to words and speech [61-62]. On the whole, research in silence studies have consistently provided evidence to say that for highly demanding cognitive tasks to be optimized, some silent time is needed for students to process meanings if needs be [63-66].

5 Conclusion

The "Healthy Foods" chapter in Bahasa Inggris: Work in Progress untuk SMA/SMK/MA Kelas X demonstrates a globalized, Western ideology of health, with an emphasis on individual responsibility. While it aligns with communicative and task-based language learning theories, it also reinforces dominant health norms, potentially marginalizing local cultural practices. The text reflects the power dynamics identified by CDA and health communication theories, focusing on individual behavior without acknowledging the structural barriers that influence food choices. Future revisions of such educational materials could benefit from a more critical approach that engages students with diverse perspectives on health and nutrition.

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