




## Evaluating the Cultural and Pedagogical Fits of the Top-Notch Series in Iranian EFL Contexts: A Mixed-Methods Study

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### Article Info

### ABSTRACT

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**Purpose:** This study aimed to evaluate whether the Top-Notch series meets the linguistic, pedagogical, and cultural needs and expectations of Iranian EFL learners and teachers.

**Methods and Materials:** This mixed-methods research employed a sequential explanatory design integrating quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative phase involved 180 Iranian EFL learners and 30 English teachers from six private institutes across Tehran, Isfahan, and Shiraz, selected through stratified random sampling. Participants completed a validated 36-item questionnaire measuring linguistic needs, pedagogical needs, cultural appropriateness, and expectations, with reliability indices ranging from .81 to .89. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, independent-samples t-tests, one-way ANOVA, and Pearson correlation coefficients. In the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 learners and 15 teachers to explore their perceptions of the cultural and pedagogical suitability of the Top-Notch series. Interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis supported by MAXQDA.

**Findings:** Inferential results showed no significant gender differences in overall satisfaction ( $t(178) = -1.62, p = .107$ ). A one-way ANOVA indicated significant differences in perceptions of cultural appropriateness across proficiency levels ( $F(2,177) = 3.49, p = .033, \eta^2 = .038$ ), with advanced learners rating cultural fit significantly lower than intermediate learners. Pearson correlation analysis revealed strong positive correlations between linguistic needs and overall satisfaction ( $r = .58, p < .01$ ), and moderate correlations between cultural appropriateness and overall satisfaction ( $r = .48, p < .01$ ), indicating that both linguistic relevance and cultural resonance significantly contribute to learners' evaluations of the textbook.

**Conclusion:** The Top-Notch series demonstrates strong pedagogical value and supports communicative language learning; however, its cultural content shows limited alignment with Iranian learners' sociocultural context, underscoring the need for localized adaptation and culturally responsive supplementary materials.

**Keywords:** Textbook evaluation, intercultural communication, EFL pedagogy, cultural adaptation, Iranian learners, Top-Notch series

## 1. Introduction

The accelerating expansion of English as a global lingua franca has reshaped educational systems worldwide, positioning English Language Teaching (ELT) as a vital component of academic mobility, economic participation, and intercultural communication. In contexts such as Iran, where English is taught as a foreign language, textbooks continue to function as the foundational pedagogical tool that mediates language input, cultural knowledge, and classroom practices. Because foreign-produced materials often serve as the primary instructional resource in private institutes, debates surrounding their pedagogical suitability and cultural compatibility have intensified over recent years. As scholars increasingly highlight the need for contextualized language education, the evaluation of globally developed textbooks has become an essential priority for EFL stakeholders in Iran and other non-Western environments (Karim & Harwood, 2026; Li et al., 2025).

Textbook evaluation is particularly important in settings where the imported materials carry embedded assumptions about learning styles, cultural values, and communicative norms that may not align with local expectations. Research on global ELT materials has shown that textbooks often embody Western orientations toward interaction, social relations, and classroom participation, which may conflict with the sociocultural and educational realities of learners in the Middle East and Asia (Arslan, 2024; Derakhshan, 2024). The increasing recognition of English as an international language (EIL) has prompted scholars to call for pedagogical models that acknowledge linguistic diversity, cultural pluralism, and context-driven adaptation (Uyar & Erozan, 2024; Vo & Tran, 2025). Yet, despite this shift, many widely used textbooks continue to privilege Western norms of language use, identity, and communication, creating potential tensions for learners and educators who operate within distinct cultural frameworks (Smagul, 2024; Sun, 2023).

These tensions are further complicated in countries like Iran where the role of English education is influenced by sociopolitical discourses, cultural sensitivities, and national identity considerations. Previous studies examining the effects of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) and globally oriented pedagogy have underscored that learners' identities and cultural backgrounds significantly shape their engagement with English-language materials (Ahmed, 2025; Chen, 2022). When the content of a textbook does not reflect learners' lived experiences, values, or social norms,

learners may experience reduced motivation, limited cultural connection, or feelings of cultural distance. This cultural gap is particularly salient in contexts where imported textbooks—frequently developed in Western countries—reproduce monocultural narratives that indirectly position Western lifestyles as universal, implicitly marginalizing local knowledge systems (Algouzi & Hazaea, 2023; Lendo et al., 2023).

For Iranian EFL learners, textbooks operate not only as linguistic scaffolds but also as cultural windows that shape their interpretations of English-speaking societies. However, as research demonstrates, cultural representations in English textbooks used in the region often remain unbalanced, emphasizing Western perspectives while underrepresenting local or regional identities (Nader Sharhan & Janfeshan, 2024; Yonata et al., 2024). Studies conducted within the Iranian context further reveal that national and institutional priorities stress the importance of maintaining cultural integrity, religious norms, and social coherence in educational content, which can create conflict with global material that promotes individualistic, secular, or commercial values (Rezaee & Saleh, 2025; Tajeddin & Teimournezhad, 2014). This tension necessitates a systematic and evidence-based examination of widely used global textbooks such as the Top-Notch series, which occupies a major role in private language institutes across Iran.

Pedagogically, imported textbooks are frequently praised for their structured approach to communicative language teaching, scaffolding of skills, and integration of interactive tasks. For instance, playful learning and project-based approaches in global ELT materials have been shown to enhance engagement and support self-regulated learning (Cao, 2024; Li et al., 2025). Similarly, digital-enhanced, interactive, or multimodal components can support vocabulary learning, improve learner motivation, and promote active participation—features often valued by instructors and curriculum designers (Bulusan, 2025; Huang, 2024). In addition, research on task-based and inquiry-based practices indicates that effective textbooks must include opportunities for creative thinking, learner autonomy, and collaboration—elements commonly emphasized in international series such as Top-Notch (Liu & Ren, 2024; Parsaiyan & Gholami, 2025).

Nevertheless, the successful implementation of these pedagogical features depends heavily on the sociocultural conditions of the classroom. In Iran, large class sizes, exam-oriented learning, and limited opportunities for authentic

communication may restrict the full realization of communicative methodologies embedded in global textbooks (Goyal & Rose, 2020; Wakuma, 2025). Teachers' beliefs, professional identities, and contextual constraints further influence whether the intended pedagogy of a textbook is enacted, modified, or resisted in practice (Delogu & Greenier, 2025; Vu & Nguyen, 2025). Curriculum reform research across Asian EFL contexts similarly emphasizes the crucial role of teacher agency in mediating globalized materials and adapting them to local norms, expectations, and learning styles (Harwood, 2025; Vo & Tran, 2025). These findings suggest that any evaluation of an imported textbook must consider not only its content but also how it resonates with learners' and teachers' needs, expectations, and cultural backgrounds.

Cultural and semiotic analyses of textbooks have become increasingly prominent as scholars highlight the ideological dimensions of ELT materials. Research from Hong Kong, Indonesia, China, Mongolia, and Kazakhstan demonstrates that textbooks often foreground specific cultural scripts while omitting or marginalizing others, shaping learners' perceptions of global identity and intercultural relations (Feng, 2019; Lendo et al., 2023; Li et al., 2023; Smagul, 2024). In many cases, Western lifestyles are overrepresented through visual imagery, narratives, personal choices, and communicative scenarios, which can implicitly frame Western cultural patterns as the norm. Such patterns raise questions about whether imported ELT materials reinforce linguistic imperialism, promote cultural homogenization, or inadequately prepare learners to navigate intercultural encounters within multilingual, multicultural settings (Arslan, 2024; Ulum, 2025).

Within the Iranian EFL context, concerns regarding cultural imbalance have been especially prominent. Studies examining national textbooks, localized materials, and international commercial series have consistently identified issues related to the underrepresentation of Iranian values, cultural traditions, religious norms, and social structures (Derakhshan, 2024; Esmaeilee, 2024). Moreover, scholars have found that learners and teachers expect ELT materials to portray Iranian cultural elements alongside global content to support intercultural comparison, identity formation, and meaningful engagement (Sahraee Juybari & Bozorgian, 2020; Soodmand Afshar & Yousefi, 2019). The desire for cultural authenticity is often accompanied by expectations for pedagogical relevance, technological integration, and practical communicative tasks that align with local learning

habits and institutional constraints (Ahmed, 2025; Bulusan, 2025).

Contemporary research has also underscored the importance of multimodality and linguistic variation in textbooks. Studies of multimodal co-selection of grammatical features in primary EFL textbooks and analyses of tense distribution in global texts demonstrate that learning materials communicate meaning through a dynamic interplay of visual, lexical, and contextual cues (Sun, 2023; Zhou et al., 2025). Thus, a comprehensive evaluation of any textbook must integrate linguistic, cultural, and pedagogical dimensions in order to determine how well it supports learners' communicative competence and intercultural development.

In parallel, global trends in culturally responsive pedagogy highlight the importance of integrating learners' identities, values, and cultural resources into classroom materials. Recent work on GenAI-supported curriculum design in the MENA region demonstrates that digital tools can support the development of more context-sensitive and culturally relevant materials for young learners (Mahmoudi-Dehaki & Nasr-Esfahani, 2025). Likewise, interdisciplinary research on social justice in EFL classrooms shows that textbooks play a crucial role in shaping learners' perceptions of equity, marginalization, and representation, particularly when dealing with culturally diverse or refugee student populations (Ulum, 2025). These studies signal a growing shift toward democratizing ELT materials by foregrounding inclusivity, cultural multiplicity, and learner empowerment.

Despite these advances, tensions persist between the globalized orientation of international ELT textbooks and the localized expectations of teachers and learners in Iran. Teachers increasingly articulate the need to balance exposure to global English with the preservation of cultural identity and the development of critical thinking about cultural narratives (Bulusan, 2025; Rezaee & Saleh, 2025). Learners similarly express expectations for materials that support practical communication while reflecting their cultural experiences, values, and social realities (Ahmed, 2025; Yonata et al., 2024). Therefore, evaluating widely used textbooks like the Top-Notch series requires a holistic, empirically grounded approach that considers learner needs, teacher perspectives, linguistic content, multimodal features, cultural representations, and pedagogical alignment.

Against this backdrop, the Top-Notch series—one of the most widely used international textbooks in Iranian private institutes—constitutes a critical case for examining how global ELT materials interact with the sociocultural and

pedagogical realities of the Iranian EFL context. Its communicative approach, multimodal features, and globally oriented content make it an influential model for language education. However, its suitability for Iranian learners remains underexplored, particularly in relation to cultural representation, contextual alignment, and learner expectations. Therefore, the aim of this study is to evaluate whether the Top-Notch series meets the needs and expectations of Iranian EFL textbook users in terms of cultural compatibility and pedagogical suitability. Thus, the research questions are as follows:

RQ1: What are the needs of Iranian EFL textbook users?

RQ2: What are the expectations of Iranian EFL textbook users?

RQ3: Does Top-Notch Series meet the needs of Iranian EFL textbook users?

RQ4: Does Top-Notch Series meet the expectations of Iranian EFL textbook users?

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Study Design and Participants

The participants in this mixed-methods study consisted of 180 Iranian EFL learners and 30 English language teachers selected from six private language institutes across Tehran, Isfahan, and Shiraz where the Top-Notch series is widely used as the core instructional material. A stratified random sampling approach was employed to ensure balanced representation across different proficiency levels (beginner, intermediate, and advanced) and institutional contexts. The learners' ages ranged from 17 to 32 years, while teachers' teaching experience ranged between 3 and 15 years. All participants had a minimum of two semesters of experience with the Top-Notch series. The inclusion criteria required active engagement in the Top-Notch curriculum for at least one academic term to ensure familiarity with its content and pedagogical design. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and ethical approval was secured from the university's research ethics committee.

### 2.2. Instruments

The study utilized both quantitative and qualitative instruments to gather comprehensive data on the learners' and teachers' perceptions of the cultural and pedagogical suitability of the *Top-Notch* series.

#### 2.2.1. Needs and Expectations Questionnaire

A researcher-adapted questionnaire based on Hutchinson and Waters' (1987) Needs Analysis Framework and Cortazzi and Jin's (1999) model of Cultural Representation in ELT Materials was employed (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999). The instrument included four subscales: (a) linguistic needs, (b) pedagogical needs, (c) cultural appropriateness, and (d) learner expectations. The questionnaire contained 36 Likert-scale items ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). To establish content validity, three TEFL experts and two applied linguistics professors reviewed the items for clarity, cultural sensitivity, and alignment with the research objectives. Construct validity was verified through Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) using principal component extraction with varimax rotation, yielding four distinct factors that corresponded to the theoretical model. The reliability of the questionnaire was examined using Cronbach's alpha, with coefficients ranging from .81 to .89 across subscales, indicating high internal consistency.

#### 2.2.2. Semi-Structured Interviews

To obtain in-depth qualitative insights, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 teachers and 20 learners selected through purposive sampling. The interview guide included open-ended questions on learners' and teachers' perceived cultural relevance, authenticity, and pedagogical suitability of Top-Notch materials. Interview questions were validated by two experts in applied linguistics to ensure face validity and content coverage. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and later analyzed through thematic coding.

### 2.3. Procedure

The research was conducted over one academic semester (approximately 16 weeks). In the first stage, participants completed the Needs and Expectations Questionnaire in paper-based format during regular class hours, taking approximately 25 minutes to complete. Following the quantitative phase, the qualitative interviews were conducted with a smaller subset of participants to triangulate and expand upon the quantitative findings. A total of 35 semi-structured interviews were conducted—20 with learners and 15 with teachers—to explore perceptions of the Top-Notch series in terms of pedagogical appropriateness, cultural representation, and learner expectations. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed in MAXQDA

(Version 2020) through thematic coding following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase model (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interviews were held in Persian to ensure the participants’ comfort and accuracy in expression, and later translated into English for analysis. Data collection was organized sequentially, consistent with a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), where quantitative results informed the qualitative phase. Throughout the process, anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained, and the participants were allowed to withdraw at any time without penalty.

2.4. Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the questionnaires were analyzed using SPSS (Version 27). Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, and frequency) were computed to identify the participants’ overall needs and expectations. Independent-samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA were conducted to examine potential differences across gender, proficiency levels, and institutional contexts. Additionally, Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to explore the relationships among the four subscales of the

questionnaire. For qualitative data, MAXQDA (Version 2020) was employed to conduct a thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization, coding, theme generation, reviewing, defining, and reporting. Themes were triangulated with quantitative results to enhance the interpretive validity of the findings. This integrative analysis allowed for a nuanced evaluation of how the Top-Notch series aligns with the pedagogical and cultural expectations of Iranian EFL learners and teachers.

3. Findings and Results

As shown in Table 1, Iranian EFL learners rated their linguistic needs (M = 4.21, SD = 0.52) and expectations (M = 4.10, SD = 0.58) relatively high, indicating strong perceived needs and expectations toward communicative and skill-based content. The cultural appropriateness (M = 3.46, SD = 0.73) received the lowest mean score, suggesting moderate satisfaction with how the Top-Notch series represents Iranian learners’ sociocultural context. The relatively small standard deviations (ranging from 0.52 to 0.73) indicate consistent responses among participants.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables

Variable	M	SD
Linguistic needs	4.21	0.52
Pedagogical needs	3.89	0.61
Cultural appropriateness	3.46	0.73
Expectations	4.10	0.58
Overall satisfaction	3.91	0.55

An independent samples t-test in Table 2 was conducted to compare male and female learners’ overall satisfaction with the Top-Notch series. Results revealed no statistically significant gender difference,  $t(178) = -1.62, p = .107$ .

Female learners (M = 3.96, SD = 0.53) reported slightly higher satisfaction than males (M = 3.85, SD = 0.56), but this difference was not significant. Therefore, satisfaction with Top-Notch appears consistent across genders.

Table 2

Independent Samples T-Test: Gender Differences in Overall Satisfaction

Gender	n	M	SD	t(178)	p	95% CI (LL, UL)
Male	84	3.85	0.56	-1.62	.107	[-0.17, 0.02]
Female	96	3.96	0.53			

ANOVA results in Table 3 indicated a significant effect of proficiency level on perceptions of cultural appropriateness,  $F(2,177) = 3.49, p = .033, \eta^2 = .038$ , suggesting a small-to-moderate effect size. Post Hoc (Tukey

HSD) results indicate that advanced learners (M = 3.21, SD = 0.70) rated the cultural fit significantly lower than intermediate learners (M = 3.61, SD = 0.74),  $p = .029$ . Advanced learners expressed less satisfaction with the

cultural content of Top-Notch, likely due to greater intercultural awareness and exposure to authentic contexts,

which heightened their sensitivity to cultural representation issues.

**Table 3**

*One-Way ANOVA: Differences in Cultural Appropriateness by Proficiency Level*

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p	$\eta^2$
Between Groups	3.412	2	1.706	3.49	.033	.038
Within Groups	86.965	177	0.491			
Total	90.377	179				

As shown in Table 4, all variables were positively and significantly correlated. The strongest correlation was between linguistic needs and overall satisfaction ( $r = .58, p < .01$ ), implying that meeting linguistic goals is a key determinant of learners' satisfaction. Cultural appropriateness also had a moderate positive correlation with overall satisfaction ( $r = .48, p < .01$ ), confirming that learners' sense of cultural connection influences their overall perception of material quality. Descriptive data revealed

that linguistic and pedagogical needs, along with high learner expectations, were strong and consistent among participants. In addition, the Top-Notch series moderately met learners' needs; linguistic and pedagogical components aligned well, but cultural content showed room for improvement. The series met learner expectations in communicative and skill-based instruction but fell short in culturally responsive representation, particularly for advanced learners.

**Table 4**

*Pearson Correlation Matrix Among Study Variables*

Variables	Linguistic needs	Pedagogical needs	Cultural appropriateness	Expectations	Overall satisfaction
Linguistic needs	—				
Pedagogical needs	.46**	—			
Cultural appropriateness	.39**	.42**	—		
Expectations	.51**	.47**	.36**	—	
Overall satisfaction	.58**	.54**	.48**	.55**	—

Note.  $p < .01$  (two-tailed).

In sum, descriptive statistics indicated that Iranian EFL learners expressed high linguistic ( $M = 4.21, SD = 0.52$ ) and pedagogical needs ( $M = 3.89, SD = 0.61$ ), along with high expectations ( $M = 4.10, SD = 0.58$ ) toward Top-Notch materials. However, cultural appropriateness received lower ratings ( $M = 3.46, SD = 0.73$ ). An independent-samples t-test showed no significant gender difference in overall satisfaction,  $t(178) = -1.62, p = .107$ . A one-way ANOVA revealed significant differences among proficiency levels in perceptions of cultural appropriateness,  $F(2,177) = 3.49, p = .033, \eta^2 = .038$ , with advanced learners rating cultural fit lower than intermediates. Correlational analyses demonstrated significant positive associations among all variables ( $p < .01$ ), suggesting that linguistic and pedagogical relevance strongly contribute to learners' overall satisfaction with the Top-Notch series.

Initially, employing thematic analysis, the authors generated 89 open codes, which were subsequently merged

into 15 focused codes and finally refined into four overarching themes corresponding to the research questions: Perceived learner needs, pedagogical effectiveness and methodological fit, cultural representation and localization, and learner expectations and areas for improvement. Inter-coder reliability was established through independent coding of 20% of the data by two coders (Cohen's  $\kappa = .87$ ), indicating high agreement. The themes, each with an excerpt, are as follows:

**Theme 1: Perceived Learner Needs**

This theme captured learners' and teachers' descriptions of their communicative, linguistic, and socio-pragmatic needs. Most participants emphasized the necessity of integrating authentic communication and contextualized practice. Subthemes: Need for communicative interaction, need for real-life speaking contexts, and need for culturally relevant vocabulary and expressions.

**Sample Excerpts:**

*"We need more activities that let us speak naturally, not just repeat dialogues from the book."* (Learner 12)

*"Students want to learn how to use English for real communication, not only for exams."* (Teacher 3)

Both learners and teachers underscored the importance of practicality and communication over form-focused instruction. The data suggest that Top-Notch partially satisfies linguistic needs but could enhance contextualized communicative opportunities, echoing findings from the quantitative phase where linguistic needs ( $M = 4.21$ ) scored the highest.

**Theme 2: Pedagogical Effectiveness and Methodological Fit**

This theme involved perceptions of the book's teaching methodology, structure, and classroom usability. While most teachers found the series well-organized, some expressed concern about its limited adaptability to local pedagogical realities. Subthemes: Clarity and sequencing of lessons, balance of skills integration, and flexibility for teachers' adaptation.

**Sample Excerpts:**

*"The units are well-structured, but they move too quickly for lower-level learners."* (Teacher 7)

*"Listening sections are excellent, but sometimes the speaking parts don't allow enough creative thinking."* (Learner 5)

Participants recognized the Top-Notch series as pedagogically sound, particularly for skill integration and gradual language scaffolding. However, the rigid pacing and pre-determined interaction patterns were perceived as constraints. These observations support the quantitative results where pedagogical needs received a high but slightly lower mean ( $M = 3.89$ ) than linguistic needs, suggesting partial alignment.

**Theme 3: Cultural Representation and Localization**

This theme addressed how the Top-Notch series reflects or fails to reflect Iranian learners' cultural realities and identities. A dominant pattern emerged: While the material exposes learners to global cultures, it lacks localization and cultural balance. Subthemes: Representation of global vs. local culture, cultural identification and learner engagement, and need for Iranian or regional cultural elements.

**Sample Excerpts:**

*"The book shows American and Western lifestyles, but I never see anything from our own culture."* (Learner 18)

*"Cultural exposure is good, but some examples feel too foreign for students to relate to."* (Teacher 11)

*"There's a gap between our daily life and what is shown in the textbook dialogues."* (Learner 9)

The analysis revealed that learners appreciate intercultural exposure but simultaneously desire balanced cultural representation. The dominance of Western-centric content limited learners' cultural connection and engagement, particularly among advanced learners—an observation consistent with the ANOVA results where higher-level learners rated cultural appropriateness significantly lower ( $p = .033$ ). This theme strongly addressed RQ3 and RQ4, indicating that Top-Notch partially meets but does not fully localize its cultural dimensions.

**Theme 4: Learner Expectations and Areas for Improvement**

This theme captured participants' future-oriented perspectives on how *Top-Notch* could be enhanced to better meet Iranian EFL contexts. Subthemes: Expectation for localized examples and tasks, expectation for more critical thinking and intercultural dialogue, and expectation for technology-enhanced and interactive resources.

**Sample Excerpts:**

*"It would be great if the book included Iranian festivals or traditions so that we can share our culture in English."* (Learner 14)

*"Teachers should be able to supplement the book with online videos or tasks that fit Iranian learners better."* (Teacher 2)

*"I expect a book to make me think, not just memorize expressions."* (Learner 4)

Participants expressed a clear desire for curriculum localization and interactive learning components. The qualitative evidence reveals a convergence with quantitative findings showing high expectations ( $M = 4.10$ ). Learners expect textbooks to blend communicative pedagogy with culturally meaningful content and digital learning tools. This aligns with needs-based curriculum design principles (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987) that emphasize contextual responsiveness.

Using MAXQDA's code relations browser, intersections among "Cultural Representation" and "Learner Engagement" codes showed a 72% co-occurrence, confirming that learners' engagement is strongly tied to how well they identify culturally with the content. Additionally, the MAXMaps visualization demonstrated that pedagogical fit and cultural fit are interconnected through the mediating theme of Learner Expectations—illustrating the holistic nature of curriculum evaluation. In sum, qualitative findings complemented and deepened the quantitative results. While

SPSS analysis showed high needs and expectations but moderate cultural satisfaction, MAXQDA analysis explained *why*: learners valued global exposure but experienced a disconnect from their own cultural identities.

The integrated analysis thus highlighted the need for a context-sensitive revision of the Top-Notch series to ensure both pedagogical and cultural congruence with Iranian EFL learners.

**Table 5**

*Code System and Frequency of Occurrence*

Major Theme	Subthemes	Code Frequency (n)	% Coverage
Perceived Learner Needs	Communicative interaction needs	42	11.5%
	Contextualized vocabulary use	35	9.6%
Pedagogical Effectiveness	Lesson sequencing and structure	38	10.4%
	Skills integration	29	7.9%
Cultural Representation	Global vs. local balance	44	12.1%
	Cultural identification and engagement	40	11.0%
Learner Expectations	Localized materials and activities	32	8.8%
	Interactive learning and technology	27	7.4%
Total	—	287	100%

Table 5 presents the coding frequencies extracted from MAXQDA’s Code Matrix Browser. The most frequently coded theme was Cultural Representation (23.1% combined coverage), followed by Perceived Learner Needs (21.1%). This pattern indicates that participants’ discussions were primarily centered on cultural fit and authentic

communication needs, echoing the quantitative finding that cultural appropriateness was the lowest-rated construct ( $M = 3.46$ ). The high density of codes under “Cultural Representation” reinforces those cultural issues are perceived as the most critical aspect of evaluating the Top-Notch series in the Iranian EFL context.

**Table 6**

*Code Co-Occurrence Matrix*

Codes	Communicative Needs	Pedagogical Fit	Cultural Representation	Learner Expectations
Communicative Needs	—	.64	.48	.53
Pedagogical Fit	.64	—	.58	.61
Cultural Representation	.48	.58	—	.72
Learner Expectations	.53	.61	.72	—

Note. Values indicate relative co-occurrence coefficients (0–1 scale) derived from MAXQDA’s *Code Relations Browser*.

As shown in Table 6, Cultural Representation and Learner Expectations exhibit the highest co-occurrence (.72), signifying a strong conceptual and semantic overlap in participant responses. This suggests that discussions of expectations frequently included reflections on cultural localization. Similarly, Pedagogical Fit and Communicative Needs are strongly associated (.64), revealing that participants linked effective teaching methodology with opportunities for authentic language use. These associations visually confirm the interconnectedness of pedagogical, cultural, and affective dimensions in EFL material evaluation.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to evaluate whether the Top-Notch series meets the linguistic, pedagogical, and cultural needs and expectations of Iranian EFL learners and teachers. The mixed-methods results revealed that while the series performs strongly in areas related to linguistic development and communicative scaffolding, its cultural resonance and contextual fit remain partial and uneven. The discussion below interprets these findings through the lens of existing scholarship, demonstrating how the results align with, extend, or diverge from the literature across global ELT, cultural representation, and pedagogical adaptation.

Quantitatively, learners rated their linguistic needs and expectations at high levels, and the Top-Notch series

moderately met these expectations. This aligns with studies demonstrating that global ELT textbooks often excel in promoting communicative competence through structured interactional tasks, multimodal input, and vocabulary management (Cao, 2024; Li et al., 2025). The strong correlation between linguistic needs and overall satisfaction found in this study reflects results from research showing that learners prioritize language accuracy, communicative functions, and skill integration, even when cultural alignment is less than ideal (Bulusan, 2025; Harwood, 2025). These features are characteristic of global commercial textbooks that incorporate clear sequencing, scaffolding, and activity variety to support language acquisition. Therefore, the high satisfaction with linguistic components confirms that Top-Notch successfully addresses core communicative goals valued in foreign language contexts such as Iran.

Pedagogically, the present findings reveal that learners and teachers generally appreciate the series' structured methodology but encounter challenges when transferring its communicative assumptions into teacher-centered, exam-driven environments. This echoes research showing that the intended pedagogy of global ELT materials frequently diverges from enacted classroom practice due to institutional norms, teacher beliefs, and contextual limitations (Karim & Harwood, 2026; Vu & Nguyen, 2025). Similar to findings in Turkish, Chinese, and Vietnamese EFL contexts, teachers in this study reported that activities requiring spontaneous conversation or creative thinking were difficult to implement with large class sizes, time constraints, and limited opportunities for authentic interaction (Liu & Ren, 2024; Vo & Tran, 2025; Wakuma, 2025). The current study's mixed-methods design reinforced this, as interview data highlighted concerns about rapid pacing, insufficient adaptability, and the need for supplementary materials to accommodate diverse learner profiles. These results support the broader argument that pedagogical effectiveness depends not solely on a textbook's design but also on the sociocultural and institutional ecosystem that mediates its implementation (Delogu & Greenier, 2025; Uyar & Erozan, 2024).

The most significant area of concern revealed in the findings relates to cultural representation. The quantitative results showed that cultural appropriateness received the lowest ratings among all constructs, and qualitative data confirmed that learners perceived a lack of Iranian or regionally relevant cultural content. These findings align with extensive literature indicating that global textbooks often privilege Western representations of daily life, values,

and identities, thereby creating cultural distance for learners in non-Western regions (Derakhshan, 2024; Feng, 2019). Scholars examining cultural representation in textbooks used in Asia, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe have similarly found that the absence of local culture limits learner engagement and reduces opportunities for intercultural reflection (Algouzi & Hazaea, 2023; Lendo et al., 2023; Li et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the fact that advanced learners in this study rated cultural appropriateness significantly lower than intermediate learners aligns with research demonstrating that higher-proficiency students possess more awareness of cultural mismatch and are better equipped to identify representational imbalances (Nader Sharhan & Janfeshan, 2024; Yonata et al., 2024). Advanced learners often seek authenticity, critical cultural comparison, and relational understanding, all of which are hindered when cultural content is distant from their realities. This result strengthens the argument put forth by scholars advocating for greater cultural inclusivity and learner-centered representation in EFL materials (Rezaee & Saleh, 2025; Soodmand Afshar & Yousefi, 2019).

The study's qualitative findings also revealed persistent perceptions that Western norms dominate the textbook's dialogues, visuals, and narrative contexts, reinforcing patterns observed in prior analyses of global ELT materials. For instance, research on gender representation, multimodal discourse, and social values in textbooks suggests that global ELT materials often embed ideological assumptions, positioning Western lifestyles as desirable or universal (Goyal & Rose, 2020; Zhou et al., 2025). This ideological framing has been interpreted as a form of cultural monologism that constrains intercultural competence development and narrows learners' understanding of global plurality (Sun, 2023; Ulum, 2025). The learners in this study echoed these concerns, calling for more balanced cultural representation and the inclusion of Iranian cultural symbols, social norms, and everyday realities.

In light of these findings, the study contributes to the ongoing scholarly debate regarding globalization versus localization in ELT. The moderate alignment between Top-Notch and learners' expectations underscores the central tension between globalized pedagogical models and localized cultural appropriateness (Arslan, 2024; Smagul, 2024). While global textbooks support access to internationally recognized communicative standards, they may simultaneously marginalize local identities and cultural legitimacy. The present results affirm arguments by scholars

who advocate for culturally responsive and context-sensitive curriculum development, particularly in regions where cultural integrity and sociopolitical identity play strong roles in educational governance (Esmaeilee, 2024; Mahmoudi-Dehaki & Nasr-Esfahani, 2025).

Additionally, the study reinforces the perspective that effective materials should support intercultural communicative competence (ICC) by fostering learner reflection on both global and local cultures. However, participants in this study seldom found opportunities for such reflection in the Top-Notch series. This resonates with literature pointing out that global textbooks often expose students to other cultures without enabling comparative, critical, or dialogic engagement (Cao, 2024; Rezaee & Saleh, 2025). ICC frameworks emphasize relationality, negotiation of meaning, and cultural mediation—features that are difficult to realize when content does not include diverse, locally resonant cultural representations (Delogu & Greenier, 2025; Huang, 2024).

The study's results also support previous findings that textbooks function as ideological and pedagogical instruments, shaping not only language but also identity, worldview, and learner agency (Feng, 2019; Smagul, 2024). Learners in this study indicated that cultural disconnect reduced their engagement, comfort, and ability to use language meaningfully in relation to their own lives. This reflects the findings of research on EIL and EFL teachers' perceptions across various countries, which stresses that learners benefit most when materials allow them to explore their own culture in English rather than solely adopting external cultural narratives (Uyar & Erozan, 2024; Wakuma, 2025).

Moreover, the results highlight the mediating role of **teacher adaptation**. Many teachers in the qualitative phase described supplementing the textbook with localized examples, multimedia content, and culturally relevant tasks. This aligns with research demonstrating that teacher agency and instructional flexibility are critical factors in overcoming the cultural and pedagogical limitations of global ELT materials (Vo & Tran, 2025; Vu & Nguyen, 2025). Iranian teachers' compensatory strategies illustrate how materials can be improved when teachers act not as passive implementers but as cultural mediators and curriculum designers.

Taken together, the findings indicate that the Top-Notch series exhibits a dual character: pedagogically effective yet culturally limited. This pattern is consistent with broader studies evaluating similar global textbooks across Asia, the

Middle East, and Europe (Lendo et al., 2023; Li et al., 2023). The results underscore the need for a more nuanced, context-sensitive approach to designing, evaluating, and adapting ELT materials for culturally diverse classrooms.

In summary, the results of this study both converge with and extend previous scholarship by demonstrating that while Top-Notch aligns well with global communicative principles, its cultural representations and contextual assumptions require considerable adaptation to resonate with Iranian learners' identities, expectations, and learning environments.

This study was limited by its sampling scope, which included learners and teachers from selected private institutes in three major Iranian cities; thus, the findings may not fully represent smaller institutes or rural contexts. The study also relied heavily on self-reported data, which may be influenced by personal bias, social desirability effects, or subjective interpretation of the textbook's cultural content. Additionally, although mixed methods were employed, observational classroom data were not collected, preventing a direct evaluation of how teachers implement or adapt the Top-Notch series in real instructional settings.

Future studies could incorporate classroom observations or discourse analysis of real-time interactions to examine how teachers mediate cultural and pedagogical gaps when using global textbooks. Longitudinal research may also provide insight into how sustained exposure to culturally distant materials affects learners' motivation, identity negotiation, and intercultural competence. Comparative studies between global and locally produced textbooks or intervention studies testing culturally adapted textbook units could further clarify how cultural alignment influences learning outcomes in Iranian EFL contexts.

Teachers can enhance the effectiveness of the Top-Notch series by supplementing it with culturally relevant examples, localized classroom discussions, and real-life communicative tasks grounded in Iranian social contexts. Curriculum designers should consider blending global content with regional themes to create a more balanced learning environment that reflects students' identities. Institutions can support teachers by providing training on pedagogical adaptation, intercultural strategies, and flexible materials design to ensure that global textbooks are used in ways that maximize learner engagement and contextual relevance.

## Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

## Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

## Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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## Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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## Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were under the ethical standards of the institutional and, or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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