

Semiotic Strategies in ELT Textbooks: A Comparative Analysis of the *Evolve* Global and Special Editions

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Abstract

This study examines the semiotic strategies employed in the *Evolve* English Language Teaching (ELT) textbook series through a comparative analysis of its Global Edition and the Special Edition tailored for learners in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf region. Drawing on Barthes' (1977) semiotic concepts of denotation, connotation, and anchorage, and Kress and van Leeuwen's (2020) theory of non-arbitrary signs, it explores how visual and linguistic elements are redesigned to reflect local religious, cultural, and social values while preserving pedagogical aims.

Using qualitative semiotic analysis, the study identifies four key strategies: substitution, modification, deletion, and retention, each aligning with Barthes's framework of signification and Kress and van Leeuwen's social view of signs. The localized edition thus emerges as a re-semiotized product that negotiates global educational objectives and local sociocultural expectations.

The study contributes to debates on culturally responsive ELT design and highlights the importance of semiotic analysis as a critical tool for understanding ideology in educational materials.

Keywords: semiotic strategies; cultural localization; ELT textbooks; textbook adaptation; Barthes; Kress and van Leeuwen; Saudi Arabia

1. Introduction

The global spread of English, initially driven by colonial expansion, has evolved to serve as a global lingua franca underpinning international communication, education, and economic exchange (Crystal, 2003; Seidlhofer, 2013). Consequently, English Language Teaching (ELT) materials have become central instruments not only for linguistic instruction but also for the transmission of cultural meanings (Gray, 2002; Risager, 2006). ELT textbooks, in particular, function not merely as pedagogical tools but also as semiotic constructs that mediate language, ideology, and cultural cognition (Weninger & Kiss, 2013). Designed for use across diverse contexts, global textbooks must navigate the tension between standardized instruction and cultural appropriateness (Hadley, 2014). As such, they constitute potent sites for examining meaning-making practices and the sociocultural ideologies that inform language education.

Among such educational resources, the *Evolve* series, published by Cambridge University Press, exemplifies this globalizing trend. Used in several educational contexts across the Gulf region, *Evolve* seeks to deliver communicative, visually engaging, and thematically broad instruction for adult and young adult learners. However, its Global Edition inevitably reflects cultural assumptions grounded in Western liberal norms, particularly in representations of gender roles, lifestyle choices, interpersonal relationships, and leisure activities, as reflected in both its textual and visual representations. While such representations may appear neutral within one sociocultural context, they can provoke resistance, discomfort, or misalignment within another (Canagarajah, 1999). As Hadley (2014) notes, what appears appropriate in one cultural context may be considered controversial or even offensive in another.

The aim of this study is to explore the semiotic strategies employed in the cultural localization of the *Evolve* English Language Teaching (ELT) textbook series by comparing its Global and

Special Editions. Drawing on Barthes's (1977) concepts of denotation, connotation, and anchorage, as well as Kress and van Leeuwen's (2020) social semiotic model, the study examines how the linguistic and visual content in the Special Edition is tailored to reflect the religious, cultural, and social values of learners in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf region—one of the most conservative sociocultural contexts in the Arab world.

This study addresses a critical gap in the literature by examining how localization operates as a semiotic process, rather than as a superficial editorial adjustment. Its comparative focus on a globally recognized textbook—*Evolve*—sheds light on the ideological and cultural negotiations involved in adapting ELT content for a conservative Islamic context. As far as existing literature indicates, this is the first semiotically grounded analysis of the *Evolve* series within this sociocultural framework. The findings offer both conceptual and practical insights for curriculum developers, textbook designers, and educators engaged in creating culturally responsive materials.

To contextualize the study, it is necessary to briefly outline the nature of *Evolve*. The Global Edition is a six-level American English course for adult learners, first published in 2019, with content and visuals designed for broad international appeal. In contrast, the Special Edition, released in 2021, is a four-level course tailored to meet the linguistic and cultural expectations of learners in the Gulf. While preserving the pedagogical core of the Global Edition, the Special Edition introduces strategic modifications to its textual and visual content to ensure greater cultural relevance—a process aligned with what semiotic theory describes as re-semiotization—the adaptation of sign systems to reflect new cultural meanings.

Building on these theoretical and contextual foundations, this study analyzes how the *Evolve* Special Edition employs four semiotic strategies—substitution, modification,

deletion, and retention—as acts of cultural negotiation. These strategies are interpreted not merely as editorial changes, but as meaning-making mechanisms that reflect and reproduce sociocultural ideologies. By positioning *Evolve* as a case study, the research contributes to the expanding field of textbook semiotics and cultural adaptation in ELT, offering a nuanced account of how global resources are reshaped through localized sign systems. Semiotic theory thus offers a powerful lens for interrogating meaning-making in educational materials. It illuminates how meaning is constructed, negotiated, and transformed in intercultural contexts.

2. Theoretical Background

The analysis of cultural representation in English Language Teaching (ELT) materials has long been a focus of scholarly inquiry. Textbooks, as central tools in language pedagogy, serve not only linguistic objectives but also function as semiotic artifacts transmitting cultural meanings and ideological positions. Yet, the specific semiotic strategies by which global ELT textbooks are adapted for diverse cultural contexts remain significantly underexplored. This gap is particularly salient in regions such as Saudi Arabia and the broader Gulf, where religious and cultural sensitivities heavily influence the reception and adaptation of imported educational materials. In such contexts, semiotics offers a powerful analytical lens for examining how pedagogical signs are reshaped to reconcile global communicative aims with local sociocultural sensitivities.

Traditionally, textbook analyses have relied on checklist-based frameworks to classify and quantify cultural content. Among the most widely cited is Cortazzi and Jin's (1999) tripartite model, which categorizes cultural content as source culture (the learner's own), target culture (that of the language being learned), and international culture (other global perspectives). Yuen (2011) developed a parallel typology that delineates cultural representations into four components: products, practices, perspectives, and persons. Another influential contribution

comes from Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence, which foregrounds attitudes, knowledge, skills, and critical cultural awareness—though its empirical applications often reduce these complex constructs to list-based evaluations. Kachru's (1986) Three Circles of World Englishes—comprising the Inner, Outer, and Expanding Circles—has further provided a sociolinguistic framework for contextualizing English language use globally, reinforcing hierarchical distinctions in cultural representation.

Several studies (e.g., Agustina & Kencana, 2023; Tajeddin & Teimournezhad, 2015) employed Cortazzi and Jin's framework to compare global and local textbook content. Abdul Rahim and Jalalian Daghigh (2020) and Morady Moghaddam and Tirnaz (2023) applied Byram's model to assess intercultural competence in Malaysian and Iranian textbooks. Other researchers, including Ayu (2020) and Tajeddin and Pakzadian (2020), have used Yuen's and Kachru's frameworks, respectively, to quantify cultural representations.

While these checklist-based models have informed numerous empirical studies, Weninger and Kiss (2013) critique them for presenting culture as a static collection of surface-level elements, overlooking how cultural meanings are dynamically constructed through semiotic processes. Their study represents one of the first explicit calls to adopt a semiotic lens in the analysis of cultural representations in ELT materials, shifting the focus from content classification to meaning-making processes. Drawing on Peircean semiotics, they advocate shifting from treating culture as content to viewing it as the outcome of ongoing signification processes. In this view, textbooks are not neutral repositories of cultural facts but sites of cultural production, where images, texts, and classroom tasks operate as signs that shape learners' worldviews and identities. Weninger and Kiss emphasize that linguistic and visual elements in textbooks often guide learners toward predetermined interpretations, constraining opportunities for critical

engagement and ideological questioning.

This semiotic turn has opened new theoretical possibilities for textbook analysis. Semiotics, as articulated by Roland Barthes (1977) and later developed in social semiotic theory by Kress and van Leeuwen (2020), offers a powerful lens through which to examine how signs function not merely to denote referential meaning but also to convey deeper connotative and ideological significance. Barthes' classical model of signification distinguishes three critical levels: denotation, connotation, and anchorage.

At the level of denotation, a sign communicates its most literal, context-independent meaning. For instance, an image of a young man taking a selfie in the *Evolve* textbook denotes a person photographing himself—a seemingly neutral and culturally unmarked representation.

However, connotation operates by layering culturally specific meanings onto this literal content. A visual, for example, depicting a casually dressed man and woman sharing a drink might connote informal social mixing—a norm associated with Western cultural contexts. In the localized Special Edition, this image is replaced by one featuring two men in the same pose, reflecting connotative shifts that align with Gulf sociocultural norms, particularly the discouragement of non-familial mixed-gender interactions in public settings.

Such connotative shifts not only align the content with cultural expectations but also reinforce dominant moral codes regarding gender and public conduct.

Anchorage, as Barthes (1977, p. 40) theorized, refers to the linguistic elements—such as captions, labels, or dialogue—that constrain or direct the interpretation of otherwise polysemic visual signs. A couple walking together, for example, may be anchored as “boyfriend/girlfriend” in the Global Edition, whereas the Special Edition reframes them as “husband/wife,” thus aligning the visual representation with local cultural and moral values. Anchorage, in this case, is

used to direct interpretation toward socially sanctioned relationships, ensuring the content remains culturally legitimate in the target context.

More broadly, this shows how the process of localization does not merely substitute signs but systematically reorients their semiotic anchorage to produce culturally preferred readings.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) expand Barthes' framework by proposing that signs are never arbitrary but socially motivated.

While Barthes explored the interplay between linguistic and visual signs in the construction of meaning—particularly in cultural texts and mass media—Kress and van Leeuwen extend this semiotic inquiry by foregrounding the multimodal nature of communication and emphasizing the socially and culturally motivated choices of sign-makers. They argue that signs emerge from the communicative intentions of sign-makers and the sociocultural contexts in which they are produced. In contrast to Saussure's principle of arbitrariness, they suggest that visual and textual choices reflect deliberate strategies for constructing meaning and positioning audiences ideologically. This perspective is critical for understanding how textbook designers navigate cultural sensitivities in contexts such as Saudi Arabia and the Gulf. Empirical research underscores the practical significance of these theoretical insights. Alansari (2019), for example, conducted a critical multimodal discourse analysis of the New Headway series and revealed how the Saudi edition selectively modifies gender representations, professional identities, and social interactions to align with local norms. Similarly, Dahmardeh and Mahdikhani (2025) found that Iranian local textbooks emphasize national perspectives and religious values, while global editions prioritize cultural products and cosmopolitan identities. Ansari (2023) documented persistent cultural dissonance in the Gulf when learners engage with global ELT materials, emphasizing the necessity of culturally sensitive localization to foster engagement and

comprehension. Ghajarieh et al. (2023) provide further support for this claim by showing how multimodal representations in localized Iranian textbooks promote specific cultural and ideological standpoints.

In the Saudi context, Almujaivel (2018) and Alshammri (2017) emphasize that localized textbooks often exhibit systematic reframing of cultural identity and interpersonal relationships to ensure alignment with Islamic values. Alrabai (2019) similarly argues that the sociocultural context of Saudi Arabia—particularly its conservative religious orientation—necessitates pedagogical alignment with learners' moral frameworks. Other scholars (e.g., Toledo-Sandoval, 2020; Hollie, 2017) stress that culturally responsive adaptation goes beyond mere content adjustment to include a nuanced understanding of learners' cultural affiliations and identity formation.

Wang and Hemchua (2022) emphasize that images in EFL materials are not merely decorative but densely packed with cultural meaning, often shaping implicit messages about gender, race, and class. Similarly, Roohani and Hosseini (2021) analyzed a local Iranian textbook series and showed how multimodal features—both textual and visual—construct cultural meanings and influence learners' interpretations, reinforcing the centrality of multimodality in localized ELT materials. Toprakcı and Özeydınlı (2021) discuss the challenge of balancing localization to avoid either excessive ethnocentrism or cultural imperialism—a tension directly relevant to the semiotic strategies of substitution, modification, deletion, and retention observed in the *Evolve* Special Edition. Hosseinzadeh, Heidari, and Choubasaz (2022) reinforce this argument by analyzing cultural alignment in Iranian EFL materials and revealing how visuals and texts construct national identity within global pedagogical frameworks.

Collectively, these studies underscore that textbook localization is not a superficial editorial

exercise but an ideologically charged semiotic process. Visual and textual adaptations negotiate complex sociocultural dynamics, reflecting deliberate decisions about what to include, modify, exclude, or preserve to ensure both pedagogical effectiveness and cultural appropriateness. The present study adopts this integrated semiotic framework to analyze the *Evolve* textbook series as a semiotic site of cultural negotiation. It focuses specifically on how the localized Special Edition mobilizes four principal semiotic strategies: substitution (replacing culturally discordant content with locally appropriate alternatives), modification (subtly adjusting content to align connotations with regional norms), deletion (removing content that conflicts irreconcilably with cultural or religious values), and retention (preserving culturally neutral or universally acceptable content). By examining these strategies, the study seeks to reveal how linguistic and visual signs in localized ELT materials function as instruments of cultural negotiation and ideological positioning. In doing so, it contributes both to theoretical discussions in semiotics and to practical concerns in ELT material design, illustrating how textbooks serve as powerful mediators between global pedagogical aims and local sociocultural realities.

3. Methods

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative semiotic approach grounded in the frameworks of Roland Barthes (1977) and Kress and van Leeuwen (2020). Barthes' concepts of denotation, connotation, and anchorage offer tools for analyzing signs at both literal and ideological levels. Kress and van Leeuwen's social semiotic model emphasizes the culturally motivated nature of semiotic choices and their role in shaping meaning. Together, these frameworks informed the coding scheme used to identify shifts in visual and linguistic representation across editions, guiding the investigation

of how signs in the *Evolve* Global and Special Editions are configured to negotiate cultural meaning.

A comparative design was used to analyze how semiotic choices—especially those concerning gender, religion, and social norms—are adapted in the Special Edition to reflect Gulf cultural expectations. The analysis explores how these adaptations mediate between global pedagogical aims and local ideological values, framing localization as a process of deliberate re-semiotization.

3.2 Data Collection

The dataset consists of the first four levels of the *Evolve* Global Edition (from a six-level series) and the complete four-level *Evolve* Special Edition, both published by Cambridge University Press. These levels were selected because they share parallel thematic units, enabling direct cross-edition comparison.

A systematic, page-by-page comparison was conducted across equivalent units in the two editions, including images, dialogues, reading passages, and exercises. This exhaustive examination facilitated the identification of both overt and subtle semiotic shifts. Documenting these changes provided a detailed empirical basis for analyzing how localized adaptations align with the cultural and pedagogical needs of learners in the Arab Gulf context.

3.3 Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed through a comparative semiotic lens informed by Barthes's (1977) and Kress and van Leeuwen's (2020) frameworks. Visual and linguistic signs were coded for denotative content, connotative associations, and anchorage shifts, and categorized into one of four localization strategies: substitution, modification, deletion, or retention.

Substitution involved replacing culturally incongruent signs with contextually appropriate alternatives to re-signify meaning in alignment with local cultural codes. For example, references to non-marital romantic relationships (“boyfriend”/ “girlfriend”) were replaced with marital terms (“husband”/ “wife”), and scenes depicting mixed-gender interactions were substituted with same-gender interactions.

Modification referred to nuanced adjustments—such as altering clothing styles, gestures, or specific lexical choices—that subtly shifted connotative meanings while retaining the original pedagogical function.

Deletion entailed the removal of visual or textual signs considered irreconcilable with the target culture’s norms, such as images of dogs or references to certain celebrations.

Retention preserved visual and textual elements that were culturally neutral or universally acceptable, thereby maintaining cross-edition consistency without unnecessary alteration.

Each of these strategies was systematically identified and analyzed across key representational domains, including gender roles, mixed-gender interactions, family structures, religious imagery, and culturally sensitive depictions of leisure and celebrations. This methodological approach facilitates a nuanced understanding of how the *Evolve* Special Edition negotiates the tension between global pedagogical imperatives and regional cultural contexts through deliberate semiotic choices. Together, these strategies reveal how localization in ELT materials operates not simply at the level of content adjustment but through deliberate semiotic reconfigurations that negotiate cultural meaning.

3.4 Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure analytical rigor and credibility, coding and categorization were conducted iteratively, with repeated cross-checking against theoretical constructs. Signs were interpreted within their

full multimodal context to preserve semiotic coherence, and representative examples were documented for each type of adaptation. This approach ensures transparency, replicability, and alignment with the interpretive principles of semiotic analysis.

4. Results and Discussion

A comparative semiotic analysis of the *Evolve* Global and Special Editions revealed systematic linguistic and visual adaptations designed to align textbook content with the cultural and religious values of learners in Saudi Arabia and the broader Gulf region, a context described in prior studies as maintaining conservative sociocultural norms (Elyas & Picard, 2010; Mahboob & Elyas, 2014).

The analysis identifies four primary semiotic strategies—substitution, modification, deletion, and retention—consistently employed across both visual and textual content to adapt meaning to local sociocultural norms. These strategies recur consistently across key semiotic domains, including gender representation, interpersonal interactions, the framing of romantic and familial relationships, religious and figurative imagery, and depictions of leisure and celebration. Each strategy reflects deliberate cultural negotiations that transform pedagogical materials into locally resonant semiotic texts.

4.1 Substitution

Substitution emerged as the most dominant strategy, involving the replacement of culturally sensitive visuals or linguistic expressions with alternatives aligned with local sociocultural and religious norms. Such replacements were motivated by the need to preserve cultural appropriateness, avoid socially sensitive content, and maintain moral acceptability within the target audience's context (Elyas & Picard, 2010; Mahboob & Elyas, 2014). These substitutions do not merely alter surface details; they reshape ideological meanings, in line with Barthes' (1977)

theory of connotation and his notion of anchorage, where visual and textual modifications guide interpretation within accepted cultural codes . Similarly, they reflect Kress and van Leeuwen's (2020) view of socially motivated signs, where representational choices are embedded in broader sociocultural logics. In this way, substitution functions not only as a visual or textual adjustment but also as an ideological act that reframes the intended meaning for a particular audience.

4.1.1 Mixed-Gender Interactions

Figure1 from the Global Edition depicts a male–female interaction, whereas Figure 2 in the Special Edition replaces this interaction with a same-gender pairing. In many Gulf societies, where Islamic teachings and conservative social traditions strongly influence public life (Elyas & Picard, 2010; Mahboob & Elyas, 2014), interactions between unrelated men and women are typically limited or discouraged. As such, educational materials are expected to reflect these values to maintain cultural appropriateness and avoid promoting socially sensitive behavior.

The Special Edition's visual modifications thus serve a dual purpose: localizing content and preserving social acceptability within a context where gender boundaries are highly regulated. From a semiotic perspective, such substitutions signify more than visual changes and align with Barthes' (1977) notion of connotation, where visual elements are re-anchored to convey meanings embedded in specific cultural codes. As Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) argue, substituting one social actor for another fundamentally alters the social grammar of an image, guiding viewers' interpretations within culturally accepted frameworks. In this case, the absence of mixed-gender depictions reinforce adherence to regional moral codes, transforming the ideological subtext of public interaction.



Figure 1 (Global Edition)



Figure 1 (Special Edition)

4.1.2 Familial Framing of Relationships

Figures 3 to 6 exemplify how substitution reconfigures relationship dynamics. In Figure 3 (Global Edition), a couple is labeled “girlfriend” and “boyfriend.” This is replaced in Figure 4 (Special Edition) with “wife” and “husband.” Similarly, the prompt “What are the people doing?” (Figure 5) becomes the culturally anchored “What are Eric and his wife, Mara, doing?” in Figure 6.

These substitutions illustrate Barthes’ (1977) notion of anchorage, in which linguistic labels guide and limit the interpretation of visual signs. In this case, the revised labels redirect the viewer away from depictions of non-marital romantic relationships—relationships that are considered socially inappropriate and religiously impermissible in many Islamic societies, including those of the Gulf region. Within these cultural contexts, romantic involvement is deemed acceptable only within the framework of marriage and educational materials are expected to reinforce this moral standard.

Thus, the substitution from “girlfriend/boyfriend” to “wife/husband” is not merely a lexical shift. It reorients the scene’s moral framing by situating the relationship within a culturally legitimate and religiously appropriate context. In Islamic societies, where non-marital intimacy is strongly discouraged, such adaptations help ensure cultural resonance and social acceptability. From a

semiotic standpoint, this shift exemplifies Kress and van Leeuwen's (2020) view that signs are socially motivated rather than arbitrary. These intentional semiotic choices recalibrate meaning to reflect the dominant values of the target culture, reinforcing ideological norms through seemingly minor textual and visual cues.



Figure 3 (Global Edition)

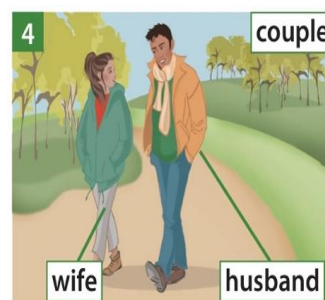


Figure 4 (Special Edition)



Figure 5 (Global Edition)

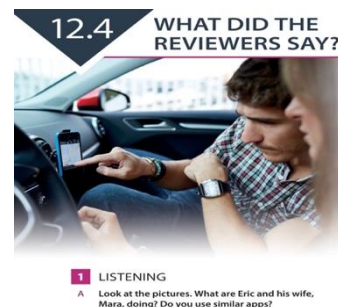


Figure 6 (Special Edition)

4.1.3 Family-Oriented Social Gatherings

Figures 7 and 8 illustrate a semiotic reconfiguration of social interaction norms. In the Global Edition (Figure 7), a casual outdoor dining scene depicts a socially diverse, mixed-gender group in a public space—suggestive of communal leisure typical in many Western contexts. In contrast, the Special Edition (Figure 8) recontextualizes the scene as an indoor, same-gender family gathering, marked by traditional attire and modest visual cues.

This substitution reflects deeper cultural and ideological values prevalent in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf region, where public interaction between unrelated men and women is regulated by religious principles and social conventions. The image in Figure 8 is not simply an alternative aesthetic; it is a socially motivated sign that re-signifies social interaction spaces toward values such as modesty, family cohesion, and respectability. Such a shift illustrates the intentional re-signification of social interaction spaces in alignment with local value systems. Drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2020) view of signs as socially shaped rather than arbitrary, this visual transformation operates as an intentional act of cultural alignment—reinforcing dominant norms of gendered behavior and domestic space in Islamic societies.



Figure 7 (Global Edition)



Figure 8 (Global Edition)

4.1.4 Handshaking Norms

Figures 9 and 10 reveal a culturally motivated adjustment in greeting practices. In the Global Edition (Figure 9), a mixed-gender handshake is depicted—an interaction widely accepted in Western professional and social contexts. In contrast, the Special Edition (Figure 10) replaces this with a same-gender greeting between two men, aligning with prevailing cultural and religious conventions in the Gulf region. Although handshakes conventionally signify politeness and respect at the denotative level, their connotative meaning, as Barthes (1977) would frame it,

shifts significantly in Islamic societies, where physical contact between unrelated men and women is generally discouraged. This visual substitution re-signifies the act of greeting, as a culturally coded practice, transforming it from a neutral gesture to one charged with cultural and ideological significance. As Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) observe, non-verbal practices such as handshakes are embedded in culturally specific codes and carry normative weight. The altered depiction operates as a deliberate semiotic choice, aligning communicative behavior with local moral frameworks and reaffirming what is deemed socially appropriate within the Gulf context.



Figure 9 (Global Edition)



Figure 10 (Special Edition)

4.1.5 Leisure and Entertainment Substitutions

Leisure activities are another domain where substitution operates strategically. Figures 7 through 18 collectively illustrate a coherent semiotic re-signification of leisure and entertainment practices in the Special Edition of the textbook, aligning both linguistic and visual signs with prevailing socioreligious values in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf societies. These changes extend beyond editorial discretion; they are strategic semiotic recalibrations that reorient interpretive possibilities to resonate with localized cultural ideologies.

A particularly illustrative pattern involves the systematic substitution of the word "party" across multiple contexts. In Figure 7 (Global Edition), the expression "plan a party" appears alongside a

vibrant, mixed-gender outdoor dining scene—an image that suggests informal, Western-style socializing. In Figure 8 (Special Edition), this is recontextualized as "plan a celebration", with an accompanying image of a same-gender family meal set indoors, featuring modest clothing and culturally neutral decor. Likewise, in Figure 15, the phrase "A FAMILY PARTY" becomes "A FAMILY GATHERING" in Figure 16. Further, the sentence "Sara and Liz are at a party" (Figure 15) becomes "Sara and Liz are at a family gathering", and the exclamatory "What a great party!" is revised to "What a great gathering!" (Figure 16).

These lexical and visual substitutions reflect the semiotic potency of the word "party" and its ideological implications. In Saudi Arabia, Gulf societies, and many conservative Arab regions, the term "party" connotes more than celebration. It is culturally loaded with associations of music, dancing, singing, mixed-gender mingling, and even alcohol consumption—all elements prevalent in Western parties but interpreted as morally inappropriate or religiously prohibited in Islamic contexts under conservative interpretations of Sharia. The deliberate removal of the word "party" and its replacement with "gathering" or "celebration" performs a semiotic realignment: one that anchors meaning in culturally acceptable, family-centered social practices (Barthes, 1977).

This pattern continues in Figures 11 to 14. The Global Edition includes visual and textual references to singing, dancing, and playing the guitar. These are replaced in the Special Edition with images and phrases such as "write", "tell a story", "knit", or "swim". The exclusion of musical instruments and performance-related activities reflects broader cultural norms in many Gulf communities, where music, dancing, and singing are viewed with suspicion or disapproval based on conservative interpretations of Islamic teachings. As Alsedrani (2024) explains, many

Saudi parents oppose the inclusion of music in children's education, perceiving it as incompatible with Islamic upbringing.



Figure 11 (Global Edition)



Figure 12 (Special Edition)



Figure 13 (Global Edition)

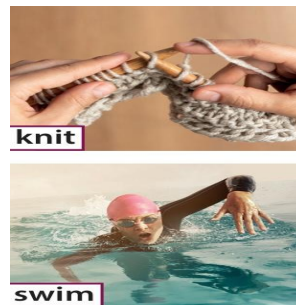


Figure 14 (Special Edition)

2.1 A FAMILY PARTY LESSON OBJECTIVE
• talk about your family

1 LANGUAGE IN CONTEXT

A 4/10 Sara and Liz are at a party. Read and listen to the conversation. How old are David and Emily? Who are Elizabeth One and Elizabeth Two?

4/10 Audio script

Sara What a great party! Liz Are your children here?
Liz Yes, they are. David ... He's my son. He's eight. And the girl with him is my daughter Emily. She's ten.
Sara And the man ... Is he your husband?
Liz No, he's my brother Marcus. My husband isn't here.
Sara Oh, OK. Are your parents here?
Liz No, they're not. Oh, look. Here's my grandmother. She's 86.
Grandma Nice to meet you, Sara. I'm Elizabeth.
Sara Nice to meet you, Hey, are you both Elizabeth?
Liz Yes, we are! With friends, I'm Liz. But in my family, she's Elizabeth One, and I'm Elizabeth Two!

REGISTER CHECK

Some words for family are formal and informal. Use formal words at work. Use informal words with friends and family.

formal	informal
grandmother	granda
father	dad
mother	mom

GLOSSARY

both said two people things

Figure 15 (Global Edition)

2.1 A FAMILY GATHERING LESSON OBJECTIVE
• talk about your family

1 LANGUAGE IN CONTEXT

A 4/10 Sara and Liz are at a family gathering. Read and listen to the conversation. How old are David and Emily? Who are Elizabeth One and Elizabeth Two?

4/10 Audio script

Sara What a great gathering! Liz Are your children here?
Liz Yes, they are. David ... He's my son. He's eight. And the girl with him is my daughter Emily. She's ten.
Sara And the man ... Is he your cousin?
Liz No, he's my brother Marcus. My cousin isn't here.
Sara Oh, OK. Are your parents here?
Liz No, they're not. Oh, look. Here's my grandmother. She's 86.
Grandma Nice to meet you, Sara. I'm Elizabeth.
Sara Nice to meet you, Hey, are you both Elizabeth?
Liz Yes, we are! With friends, I'm Liz. But in my family, she's Elizabeth One, and I'm Elizabeth Two!

REGISTER CHECK

Some words for family are formal and informal. Use formal words at work. Use informal words with friends and family.

formal	informal
grandmother	granda
grandmother	granda
father	dad
mother	mom

GLOSSARY

both said two people things

Figure 16 (Special Edition)

Another significant case of cultural filtering appears in Figures 17 and 18, where references to birthday celebrations are revised. The Global Edition (Figure 17) features expressions such as "When's your birthday?" and "Giving birthday wishes." In the Special Edition, (Figure 18) these are substituted with "What's her date of birth?" and "Saying today's date." While birthdays are globally recognized markers of social celebration, they remain theologically contested in some conservative Islamic contexts. The Arabic term "Eid Milad" ("festival of birth") mimics the structure of Islamic holy days such as "Eid al-Fitr" and "Eid al-Adha"—the only two feasts recognized in Islam. Consequently, birthday celebrations are often seen as Western imports lacking religious legitimacy. The textbook's linguistic substitutions strategically strip these events, re-signifying them as calendar facts devoid of celebratory connotation.

Asking about ages and birthdays	Saying ages and birthdays	Giving birthday wishes
1 <input type="text"/> old is he?	She ³ <input type="text"/> eight.	⁶ <input type="text"/>
When's your birthday?	He's three ⁴ <input type="text"/> old.	<input type="text"/> birthday!
² <input type="text"/> 's his birthday?	His party is ⁵ <input type="text"/> March 29.	
When's her birthday?	Miranda's birthday is April 2.	

Figure 17 (Global Edition)

Asking about ages and dates of birth	Saying ages and dates of birth	Asking about and saying today's date
1 <input type="text"/> old is he?	He ³ <input type="text"/> eight.	⁶ <input type="text"/>
How old is she?	Miranda is three ⁴ <input type="text"/> old.	today's date?
² <input type="text"/> 's his date of birth?	His date of birth ⁵ <input type="text"/> March 29.	It's October 3.
What's her date of birth?	Her date of birth is April 2.	

Figure 18 (Special Edition)

A further notable substitution in Figures 7 and 8 is the replacement of "EAT, DRINK, BE HAPPY" with "BUT FIRST, FOOD". The original phrase connotes hedonistic indulgence and alcohol consumption—signs that, within Gulf cultural and Islamic semiotic frameworks, are interpreted as morally inappropriate and religiously prohibited. The substitution neutralizes these

connotations, re-signifying the expression in accordance with Islamic principles of modesty, restraint, and social propriety.

Taken together, these substitutions exemplify what Weninger and Kiss (2013) describe as "guided semiosis"—a deliberate editorial strategy through which meaning is shaped by the selective orchestration of linguistic and visual signs. The Global Edition reflects a liberal, Western model of leisure, while the Special Edition re-signifies these practices in accordance with Gulf cultural and Islamic frameworks centered on modesty, religious propriety, and family values. As Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) argue, signs are socially produced and ideologically charged; thus, these substitutions function not merely as localization but as purposeful ideological interventions that align textbook content with the sociopolitical and theological norms of its target audience.

4.1.6 Religious and Figurative Imagery

Figures 17 and 18 exemplify how overtly religiously marked imagery is subject to strategic substitution. In Figure 17 (Global Edition), the image of Christ the Redeemer—a globally recognized Christian symbol—operates not only as a geographic landmark but also as a signifier of religious identity and cultural heritage. In Figure 18 (Special Edition), this image is replaced by a Marsh Harrier, a culturally neutral representation of wildlife that carries no theological associations. This visual substitution serves to decontextualize the overtly religious sign and re-anchor meaning within a secular and ecologically framed domain.

From a semiotic perspective, this substitution reflects what Barthes (1977) terms the deliberate reconfiguration of connotation. The image of Christ the Redeemer carries layered ideological meanings—Christian faith, Western religious architecture, and cultural dominance—that may not align with the theological norms of Islamic societies. Within many Islamic contexts, visual

representations of prophets or divine figures are generally eschewed to avoid associations with idolatry. Thus, replacing the statue with an image devoid of religious symbolism effectively neutralizes the ideological charge of the sign.

This process aligns with Kress and van Leeuwen's (2020) framework, which posits that all signs are socially produced and ideologically motivated. By removing a theologically marked symbol and replacing it with an unmarked natural image, the Special Edition performs a targeted semiotic recalibration—one that reshapes the field of interpretation to conform with localized socioreligious values and expectations. Such a guided re-signification reflects broader patterns observed across the textbook, wherein the visual code is systematically restructured to align with the interpretive frameworks of its target audience.

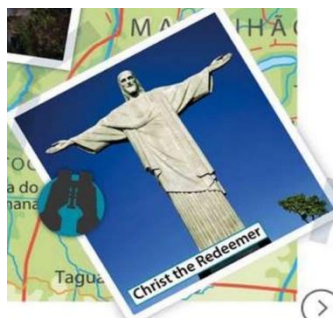


Figure 19 (Global Edition)

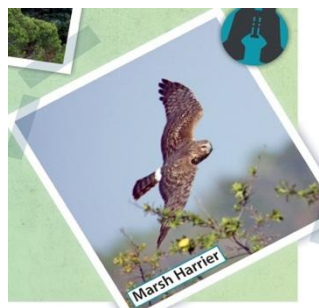


Figure 20 (Special Edition)

4.1.7 Reframing Gender Roles

Figures 21 to 26 exemplify how substitution practices extend to the semiotic domain of gender representation. In the Global Edition (Figures 21, 23, and 25), domestic activities such as doing the dishes, making the bed, and cleaning the kitchen are depicted as shared responsibilities between male and female figures. By contrast, the Special Edition (Figures 22, 24, and 26) either reassigns these tasks exclusively to female figures or eliminates male presence altogether.

This shift performs a deliberate visual re-signification of domestic labor, aligning gender roles with the conservative sociocultural expectations and gender norms in Gulf societies. Drawing on Barthes' (1977) notion of connotation, these substitutions do not merely reflect gendered behavior but actively construct and naturalize traditional ideologies by embedding them in seemingly neutral visual narratives. Likewise, Kress and van Leeuwen's (2020) theory of socially shaped signs underscores how such editorial choices selectively encode dominant cultural meanings. Through the systematic substitution of male figures with female ones, the Special Edition foregrounds a model of gendered domesticity that is firmly consistent with local norms, reaffirming visual semiotics as a powerful tool of ideological regulation. Following Barthes (1977), connotative signs in visual texts often serve to naturalize cultural ideologies. In this context, the repeated portrayal of women engaged in domestic labor may reinforce traditional associations between femininity and household responsibilities. Kress and van Leeuwen's (2020) notion that visual signs are socially motivated supports this reading: the Special Edition reconfigures gender roles to align with local values, using visual substitution as a semiotic strategy of cultural localization and ideological coherence.



Figure 21 (Global Edition)



Figure 22 (Special Edition)



Figure 23 (Global Edition)



Figure 24 (Special Edition)



Figure 25 (Global Edition)



Figure 26 (Special Edition)

4.2 Modification

Modification refers to subtle adjustments made to semiotic elements without fully replacing them. Figures 27 and 28 illustrate this strategy effectively. In the Global Edition (Figure 27), a female figure is depicted wearing Western-style clothing with her hair uncovered. In contrast, the Special Edition (Figure 28) retains the same educational setting and verbal task but modifies the character's attire to include a hijab —realigning her appearance with prevailing expectations of modesty in Gulf and Islamic contexts.

Although the communicative and pedagogical function of the image remains intact, this small visual change carries considerable semiotic weight. It reconfigures the connotative frame of the image, signaling cultural appropriateness without altering its instructional purpose. As Kress and

van Leeuwen (2020) note, even minor design changes are socially and ideologically motivated. In this case, the hijab serves as a culturally resonant visual sign that repositions the image within a locally accepted semiotic framework.

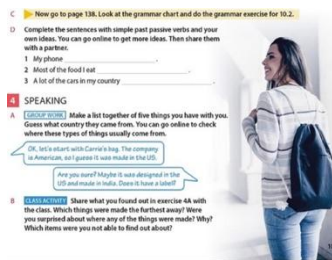


Figure 27 (Global Edition)

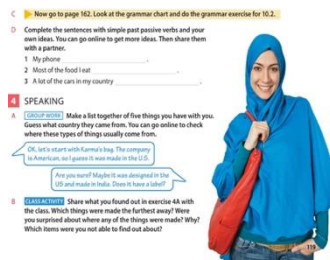


Figure 28 (Special Edition)

4.3 Deletion

Deletion refers to the strategic removal of visual or textual elements that may conflict with local sociocultural or religious expectations. Figures 29–30 illustrate the removal of a dog from a domestic scene. While dogs are often associated with companionship and affection in many Western societies, in Saudi Arabia and Islamic contexts, they are commonly regarded as ritually impure (najāsah, a concept in Islamic jurisprudence referring to ritual impurity), especially in private homes. Their exclusion from the Special Edition reconfigures symbolic meaning, aligning the representation with local religious norms.

Similarly, Figures 31–32 show the omission of a casually dressed woman whose appearance may be seen as incongruent with regional standards of modesty. In both examples, deletion operates not merely as an editorial simplification but as a deliberate semiotic act. Drawing on Barthes (1977), we can understand such absences as part of the connotative system of meaning: what is

left out can be just as ideologically loaded as what is included. In this sense, deletion becomes a strategic mechanism for re-signifying global content, anchoring meaning in the visual codes of the local context. By managing both presence and absence, the localized edition constructs a culturally coherent and socially acceptable version of everyday life.



Figure 29 (Global Edition)



Figure 30 (Special Edition)

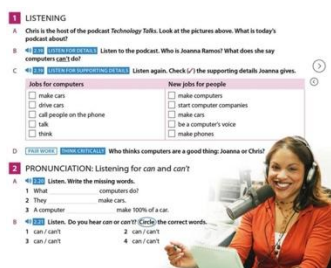


Figure 31 (Global Edition)

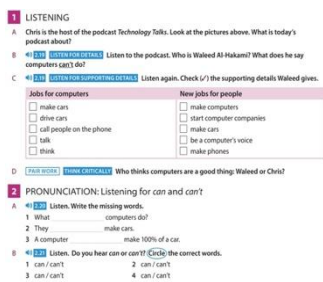


Figure 32 (Special Edition)

Retention of Culturally Neutral Elements

Despite extensive localization, many linguistic and visual elements remain unchanged between the Global and Special Editions. These retained features typically represent culturally neutral or universally acceptable practices and therefore require no adaptation. Their preservation illustrates that localization is not a wholesale transformation, but a selective and targeted process guided by cultural sensitivity and pedagogical aims.

Such retention reflects a semiotic awareness of what does not demand modification. It maintains instructional coherence while ensuring ideological alignment. Taken together, the processes of substitution, modification, deletion, and retention demonstrate that localization operates as a deliberate semiotic strategy—systematically reconfiguring meaning in ways that align with the sociocultural context of Gulf learners.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the semiotic strategies employed in the cultural localization of English Language Teaching (ELT) materials through a comparative analysis of the *Evolve* Global Edition and its Special Edition tailored for learners in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf region. Grounded in Roland Barthes' (1977) semiotic framework—particularly the notions of denotation, connotation, and anchorage—and complemented by Kress and van Leeuwen's (2020) social semiotic theory of motivated signs, the analysis has demonstrated how linguistic and visual resources are systematically reconfigured to align with local religious and cultural values while preserving the pedagogical framework of the original series. Four primary semiotic strategies were identified: substitution, modification, deletion, and retention. Substitution emerged as the most dominant strategy, functioning as an ideological re-inscription by replacing culturally incongruent semiotic elements with alternatives that conform to regional norms. Modification involved subtle visual or textual adjustments that ensured cultural compatibility without disrupting the intended educational outcomes. Deletion was employed when certain elements—such as representations considered religiously or socially inappropriate—were entirely removed, signaling deliberate acts of ideological omission that shape the interpretive space. Conversely, the retention of culturally neutral content confirmed that localization is not a

comprehensive revision, but a targeted process aimed at ensuring both curricular coherence and cultural sensitivity.

These findings suggest that the *Evolve* Special Edition is not merely a translated or adapted version of the Global Edition but a deliberately recontextualized semiotic artifact. Through intentional semiotic recalibrations, it negotiates meaning in ways that reinforce dominant cultural narratives. This process reflects Barthes' theory of connotation and anchorage, where visual and textual signs are carefully selected to guide interpretation in culturally acceptable ways. Simultaneously, it illustrates Kress's view that signs are not arbitrary but socially and ideologically motivated, shaped by the communicative needs and cultural logic of the context in which they are produced. From this perspective, ELT textbooks emerge not simply as pedagogical tools but as ideological mediums, actively participating in the construction and transmission of cultural meaning.

From a pedagogical and publishing perspective, this study underscores the importance of viewing localization as a culturally embedded act of meaning-making. Meaningful localization requires collaboration between publishers, educators, and cultural stakeholders to ensure that adapted materials resonate with learners' lived experiences while maintaining pedagogical integrity. In practical terms, these insights can inform future textbook design and teacher training programs, particularly in contexts where cultural and religious values significantly shape classroom materials. While the findings offer valuable insights, certain limitations must be acknowledged. This study focused exclusively on a single textbook series and a specific regional context, which may constrain the generalizability of the results. The analysis centered primarily on visual and linguistic signs, leaving out other potentially significant semiotic dimensions such as layout, typography, and classroom interaction. Moreover, the study analyzed published

materials in isolation from the ways learners and instructors engage with them in authentic classroom contexts. These constraints highlight the need for broader empirical research to fully understand the semiotic impact of localized ELT materials.

Future research could address these limitations by investigating localized ELT materials in diverse cultural contexts, exploring the emergence of parallel or divergent semiotic strategies. It would also be fruitful to examine whether the *Evolve* series—or comparable ELT textbooks—have undergone similar cultural modifications in contexts where they are employed, and how those adaptations reflect local ideological and pedagogical priorities.

In sum, this study demonstrates that semiotic analysis grounded in both Barthesian and social semiotic traditions offers a powerful framework for uncovering how global educational texts are transformed into culturally meaningful artifacts. In sociocultural environments such as the Gulf, where education is deeply intertwined with religious and ideological discourses, such analyses are essential for developing ELT materials that are globally communicative yet locally resonant.

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