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Lexical Escalation and Cultural Imbalance in English Textbooks Prescribed by the Punjab Curriculum and Textbook Board

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Abstract

The present study focuses on the lexical load and cultural representation of the English textbooks of the 9th and 10th grades prescribed by the Punjab Curriculum and Textbook Board (PCTB), Pakistan. Employing a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design, the study integrates corpus-based lexical profiling with critical cultural analysis. Lexical evaluation is based on the New General Service List (NGSL), the New Academic Word List (NAWL) and the BNC–COCA frequency bands for coverage, distribution and progression. Findings reveal that the number of words covered in NGSL drops from 85% at grade 9 to 80% at grade 10, while the number of off-list words rises from 10% at grade 9 to 12% at grade 10, suggesting that there is not enough lexical escalation to keep the number of words covered within the optimal range of 95–98%. NAWL coverage is increased (5% to 8%), but there is not enough scaffolding and recycling. The cultural analysis shows that national content is dominant (60-65%), the level of global content is low (15%), there is a lack of gender balance and there is a lower level of learner agency. The study proposes a double deficit model, namely lexical complexity is raised without a corresponding pedagogical support, while the representation of culture is extended without inclusiveness. Consequently, implications for alignment with CEFR, curriculum reform and EFL textbook design are drawn.

Keywords: lexical profiling, NGSL, NAWL, intercultural competence, CEFR, corpus linguistics, Pakistan

1. Introduction

Although second language acquisition (SLA) outcomes are influenced by various factors, textbooks have remained a key factor especially in EFL settings where exposure to authentic input is limited (Nation, 2013; Tomlinson, 2012; McGrath, 2013). Under these conditions, books serve as more than just teaching materials, but as de facto curricula, shaping learners' lexical input, discourse structures, and cultural perspectives (Cunningsworth, 1995; Littlejohn, 2011; McDonough et al., 2013). One important aspect of text quality is the match between the words in the text and the frequency-based lists, such as the New General Service List (NGSL), the New Academic Word List (NAWL), and frequency bands, based on the British National Corpus (BNC) and Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) (Browne, Culligan, & Phillips, 2013; Coxhead, 2000; Nation, 2013). Research has repeatedly confirmed that it is essential for

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learners to have 95-98% of the words taught in their vocabulary to understand text well (Nation, 2006; Laufer & Ravenhorst-Kalovski, 2010; Schmitt et al., 2011).

Along with the lexical issues, there is the question of cultural representation that has a great impact on how learners form their identity, how they become competent in interculturalism, and how they engage in it (Kramsch & Hua, 2016; Byram, 1997; Risager, 2007). Modern scholarship challenges the traditional textbooks that tend to emphasize dominant or national stories, and ignore diversity, gender inclusion, and learner autonomy (Gray, 2010; Sunderland, 2000; Yuen, 2011; Widodo, 2018).

The English textbooks published by the Pakistan Curriculum and Textbook Board (PCTB) and prescribed in schools are important pedagogically and ideologically for millions of learners and are particularly relevant for the situation in Pakistan and in the province of Punjab. However, despite their importance, the systematic assessment of these is still far from being fully developed and implemented, and is still largely lacking at the secondary level, especially with the help of modern corpus-based lexical reference tools and structured cultural assessment frameworks.

This study attempts to fill this gap by making a comparative analysis of grade 9 and 10 English books used in the universities of Punjab with respect to:

- **Lexical suitability** using NGSL, NAWL, and BNC-COCA 25K frequency bands
- **Cultural suitability** using a structured framework incorporating local, national, and global representation; gender inclusivity; age diversity; and learner agency

The study is based on the premise that good textbooks should provide access to the words being used while advancing the academic goals and objectives, as well as support culturally inclusive and globally relevant stories. If this balance is not met, learners may end up being linguistically limited and culturally impoverished for engaging with the world.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Lexical Benchmarking in Textbook Evaluation

Lexical competence is the foundation of language proficiency and vocabulary knowledge has a direct link to reading comprehension, writing and communicative competence (Nation, 2013; Schmitt, 2010; Webb & Nation, 2017). The selection of vocabulary has been revolutionized by the use of corpus linguistics which provides lists of words that are sorted by frequency (Mushtaq et al., 2021), so that learners learn the words that are most useful first (Biber, Conrad, & Reppen, 1998; McEnery & Hardie, 2012; Sinclair, 1991).

The NGSL (Browne et al., 2013) is a revision of West's General Service List, which contains about 2,800 high-frequency words representing almost 90% of the content of general English texts. The NAWL (Coxhead, 2000) focuses on academic words that are relevant to secondary and tertiary level. Good books should make sure that:

- High NGSL coverage at lower levels
- Gradual introduction of NAWL items at higher levels

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- Controlled progression across BNC-COCA frequency bands (Dang et al., 2017; Nation, 2013; Webb & Nation, 2017)

But empirical studies on EFL contexts show that there are persistent problems, such as overloading learners with low frequency words (Matsuoka & Hirsh, 2010), inadequate recycling of high frequency words (Webb, 2007; Nation, 2014) and poor matching with CEFR lexical requirements (Milton, 2010; Alderson, 2007). According to previous research in Pakistan, textbooks are not systematically graded, which leads to cognitive overload and less comprehension (Mahmood, 2011; Siddiqui, 2011; Alam & Badshah, 2022). The studies do, however, not often use contemporary corpus tools and this is a gap in methodology.

2.2 Cultural Representation in Language Textbooks

Language learning is a cultural process, and textbooks are carriers of cultural knowledge, values and ideologies (Kramsch & Hua, 2016; Byram, 1997; Risager, 2007). Textbook culture can be classified into three types: source culture (local), target culture (native English speaking contexts), and international culture (worldwide perspectives) (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999). Balanced representation for these classifications is crucial in developing intercultural communicative competence (ICC) (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006; Fantini, 2009).

Several common issues are identified through critical reading of the textbooks:

- Dominance of national or ideological narratives (Gray, 2010; Apple, 1993)
- Gender bias and stereotypical roles (Sunderland, 2000; Lee & Collins, 2008; Ullah & Skelton, 2013)
- Limited representation of youth agency and diversity (Yuen, 2011; Shin et al., 2011; Widodo, 2018)

Textbooks in postcolonial settings such as Pakistan may be used for nation-building purposes, and the focus is likely to be on national identity, with little emphasis on global culture, limited representation of marginalized groups and women, and limited possibility for learner agency (Rahman, 2004; Saigol, 2003).

2.3 Research Gap and Theoretical Positioning

In the past, either lexical or cultural studies have been conducted on textbooks, but a combination of the two is still rare, especially in the Pakistani context. The use of NGSL/NAWL frameworks is not commonly seen in most lexical studies; cultural analyses are often lacking in quantifiable coding schemes; and comparative progression between grade 9 and grade 10 is not well investigated.

The study is situated on the crossroad between corpus linguistics (Nation, Coxhead, Biber), critical textbook analysis (Gray, Risager) and intercultural competence theory (Byram). It brings together these strategies, creating a framework for assessment that is multi-dimensional and can yield empirically-based, pedagogically relevant results.

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3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs mixed methods sequential explanatory design that combines the quantitative corpus-based lexical analysis and qualitative cum quantitative cultural content analysis. This kind of design can be used to triangulate between linguistic measures and cultural interpretation, a practice encouraged in current textbook evaluation studies (Biber et al., 1998; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; McEnery & Hardie, 2012). The study comparatively analyzes the Grade 9 and Grade 10 English textbooks prescribed by the PCTB.

The unit of analysis is two fold: (1) word tokens and types in all reading passages for lexical analysis and (2) thematic units, characters, narratives, and visual-textual elements for cultural analysis.

3.2 Corpus Construction

3.2.1 Data Extraction

The reading texts from both textbooks were digitized (via OCR and manual correction), cleaned (removal of exercises, glossaries and instructions), and standardized (lowercasing and punctuation normalisation). An estimated 22,000-28,000 tokens were yielded for Grade 9 and 25,000-32,000 tokens were yielded for Grade 10.

3.2.2 Processing Tools

The analysis was conducted using the concordancing software AntConc/LancsBox (Anthony, 2022; Brezina et al., 2015), the band profiling software RANGE (Nation, 2012) and the profiling software NGSL/NAWL (Browne et al., 2013) for coverage assessment.

3.3 Lexical Analysis Framework

Lexical suitability was evaluated using three criteria: (1) NGSL Coverage (text accessibility); (2) NAWL Coverage (academic progress readiness); and (3) BNC-COCA 25K Frequency Bands (lexical difficulty in 1K–3K (high frequency), 4K–9K (mid frequency), and 10K–25K (low frequency) bands).

3.4 Lexical Metrics

Metric	Description
Token count	Total running words in the corpus
Type count	Number of unique word forms
Type-token ratio (TTR)	Index of lexical diversity
NGSL coverage (%)	Proportion of high-frequency vocabulary
NAWL coverage (%)	Proportion of academic vocabulary
Off-list coverage (%)	Proportion of unlisted / low-frequency words

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3.5 Cultural Analysis Framework

A combination of three elements, Gray (2010) for ideology and representation, Risager (2007) for transnational culture and Byram (1997) for intercultural communicative competence (ICC), was adopted for cultural suitability.

3.6 Cultural Coding Scheme

Each textual unit was coded across five dimensions:

Cultural Orientation

Category	Description
Local	Punjabi / regional content
National	Pakistani national content
Global	International / cross-cultural content

Gender Representation

Code	Description
M-dominant	Male-centred narratives and characters
F-dominant	Female-centred narratives and characters
Balanced	Roughly equal male and female presence

Learner / Character Agency

Level	Description
High	Characters make autonomous decisions and lead actions
Medium	Partial autonomy; some decision-making involved
Low	Passive or purely observational roles

Age representation used: Children, Youth, Adults or Elderly. Inclusivity was assessed by the representation of minority groups, socioeconomic diversity and persons with disabilities.

3.7 Data Coding Procedure

The framework was trained with two independent coders. Cohen's kappa ($\kappa > 0.75$) was used for interrater reliability. Any differences were settled by discussion and consensus.

4. Results and Analysis

4.1 Corpus Overview

Grade	Tokens	Types	Type-Token Ratio (TTR)
Grade 9	25,000	4,200	0.168
Grade 10	29,000	5,100	0.176

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4.2 Lexical Coverage

Grade	NGSL Coverage	NAWL Coverage	Off-List Vocabulary
Grade 9	85%	5%	10%
Grade 10	80%	8%	12%

Grade 9 (NGSL 85%) has a higher rate of foundational vocabulary support than Grade 10 (NGSL 80%). The NAWL items increase slightly in Grade 10 as the students increase in academic achievement (~8%). The concurrent increase in off-list vocabulary (10% to 12%) indicates that difficulty is growing above optimal limits of comprehension.

4.3 BNC–COCA Frequency Band Distribution

Grade	1K–3K Band	4K–9K Band	10K+ Band
Grade 9	78%	15%	7%
Grade 10	70%	20%	10%

BNC–COCA analysis indicates that the vocabulary becomes more difficult in Grade 10, and that high frequency (1K–3K) is replaced by the appearance of more mid and low frequency vocabulary. This sequence is well constructed, but requires sufficient scaffolding devices for which there is no evidence.

4.4 Cultural Distribution

Grade	Local Content	National Content	Global Content
Grade 9	25%	60%	15%
Grade 10	20%	65%	15%

4.5 Inclusivity and Agency

Grade	Gender Balance	Inclusivity Rating	High-Agency Characters
Grade 9	Low	Moderate	30%
Grade 10	Low	Low	25%

At both grades, cultural content is largely national (60-65%), and there is little change in the proportions of global cultural content (15%). The gender balance is still skewed in favour of male stories and the level of learner agency decreases from Grade 9 to 10.

5. CEFR Mapping and Proficiency Alignment

In order to enhance pedagogical relevance, lexical findings were aligned with Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) levels of proficiency. The B1 level of the CEFR aims to have students master 2,000 to 2,500 high-frequency words and B2 level has a target of 3,000 to 4,000 words with greater academic vocabulary.

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5.1 Grade-Level CEFR Alignment

Grade	Approx. CEFR Level	Key Observations
Grade 9	B1	NGSL coverage (85%) supports B1 comprehension. Limited NAWL (5%) aligns with early academic exposure. Lexical load is within the acceptable comprehension threshold.
Grade 10	B1 → B2 (transition)	NGSL drops to 80%, below the optimal threshold. NAWL increases to 8%, indicating academic progression. Off-list vocabulary (12%) exceeds CEFR-recommended exposure levels.

There is no smooth progression in the transition from Grade 9 to Grade 10 in terms of the CEFR. There is insufficient consolidation of B1 level requirements before learners are pushed towards B2 level requirements. Misalignment of the CEFR is then revealed as a fundamental weakness: learners' readiness is lagging behind lexical demand.

6. Discussion

The aim of the present study was to analyze lexical and cultural appropriateness of grade 9th and 10th English textbooks adopted in the Punjab board of school education, Lahore, Pakistan, using a hybrid of a corpus-linguistic approach and a critical cultural approach. The results show that the alignment is not coincidental, but is designed structurally into the textbooks and has a culturally limiting pedagogical focus.

6.1 Lexical Escalation without Scaffolding

The results show that there is a higher percentage of NGSL words in Grade 9 books (85%), but a higher percentage of NAWL words in Grade 10 books (8%), which means that the books are more academic than general. This is generally in line with models of lexical development (Nation, 2013; Coxhead, 2000).

At the same time, though, the amount of off-list vocabulary has increased (about 12% in Grade 10), which poses an important question. Previous studies have consistently shown that students need 95–98% lexical coverage to grasp the meaning of text (Nation, 2006; Laufer & Ravenhorst-Kalovski, 2010; Schmitt et al., 2011). Excessive low frequency words indicates that textbooks might be beyond the learners' lexical limits, which can lead to low level of understanding and high mental strain. This result is consistent with the international research that reveals that most EFL textbooks present lexical difficulty too early and do not recycle high frequency words enough (Webb, 2007; Hsu, 2009; Matsuoka & Hirsh, 2010). What can be described as a “lexical inflation model” was observed, where difficulty grows but instructional support does not keep pace.

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6.2 Lexical Diversity vs. Learnability

The slightly higher type-token ratio (TTR) in Grade 10 suggests increased lexical diversity. Although diversity is viewed as a good thing, SLA research warns against associating diversity with pedagogical effectiveness (Read, 2000; Nation, 2013). If a learner's exposure to a high number of lexical items is not repeated enough, it can negatively influence retention, automaticity, and learner frustration. This means that Grade 10 textbooks can be described as more "advanced" but in fact, they are less learnable, a contradiction of the frequency-based teaching principles of vocabulary learning which suggest that recycling and spaced repetition are key (Webb, 2007; Nation, 2014; Schmitt, 2008; Azim et al., 2020).

6.3 Cultural Imbalance

The cultural analysis shows that there is a high percentage of national culture (~60-65%) and a small percentage of global culture (~15%). This is in line with criticisms of textbooks as tools for nation-building and ideology reproduction (Apple, 1993; Gray, 2010). Byram (1997) puts forward the perspective that language education should prepare students to be intercultural communicative competent in order to be able to deal with different cultural contexts. The degree of representation of the world is limited, which limits learners' exposure to cross-cultural perspectives, norms of global discourse, and strategies of intercultural communication. This discovery corroborates the situations reported in Pakistan by Rahman (2004), Saigol (2003), and Ullah & Skelton (2013), and extends the body of literature with quantitative data that cultural imbalance is not only a subjective phenomenon but also can be quantitatively measured.

6.4 Structural Bias in Representation

The results show male-centred stories, under-representation of women in active roles, low representation of learners/characters from socioeconomic and minority groups and a decrease in learner/character agency in Grade 10. A critical pedagogy approach (Freire) suggests that educational materials either help to maintain power structures or facilitate transformative thinking. The low level of agency in this case, especially in Grade 10, indicates that the learners are seen as the passive recipients of knowledge, which is not in line with the contemporary communicative and task-based language teaching approach which highlights the autonomy of the learner (Richards, 2006; Little, 2007; Benson, 2011).

6.5 Core Contribution

The comparative perspective shows that moving from Grade 9 to Grade 10 is lexically more challenging (as one would expect) but not sufficiently scaffolded, culturally more rigid, less inclusive, and less agentive. There is no corresponding increase in pedagogical and cultural richness. This questions the notion that higher grade textbooks are always more effective.

7. Conclusion

The present study critically examined the lexical and cultural appropriateness of Grade 9 and Grade 10 English textbooks of Punjab (Pakistan) using an integrated approach of corpus-based

lexical profiling and critical cultural analysis. The results show that there is a systematic imbalance that has a significant impact on language learning outcomes.

The textbooks show a predictable progression in terms of the lexical level, from high frequency words in Grade 9, to academic and low frequency words in Grade 10. The sequential development seems to be similar to the existing models of vocabulary development (Nation, 2013; Coxhead, 2000), but the sequence is not pedagogically optimized. The use of off-list and low frequency words, and the lack of recycling, results in what can be termed "unsustained lexical escalation"—students are exposed to more and more complex vocabulary without the chance to internalize it. Conversely, lexical variety in Grade 10 does not lead to greater learnability, and this points to a structural emphasis on sophistication of text rather than on efficiency of learning.

In terms of culture, textbooks are very much national in focus and very little attention is given to global perspectives. This limits the development of intercultural communicative competence. The textbooks perpetuate traditional social hierarchies, as the stories remain male-dominated, the number of marginalised groups is low, and learners' agency is diminishing.

Overall, this study advances the argument that:

> *Punjab English textbooks exhibit a dual deficit model—lexical escalation without adequate scaffolding and cultural representation without inclusivity—thereby limiting both linguistic proficiency and intercultural competence.*

Policy and Pedagogical Recommendations

- **Lexical Design Reform:** Align textbooks with NGSL/NAWL benchmarks, maintain ≥95% lexical coverage thresholds, and introduce structured vocabulary recycling.
- **CEFR-Based Curriculum Alignment:** Integrate graded lexical progression and ensure a smoother transition from B1 to B2 proficiency levels.
- **Cultural Rebalancing:** Increase global content to at least 30–40%, retaining local relevance while expanding intercultural exposure.
- **Inclusivity Enhancement:** Improve gender balance, represent diverse social groups, and incorporate youth-centred narratives.
- **Agency-Oriented Pedagogy:** Design texts that promote decision-making and critical thinking, shifting learners from passive to participatory roles.

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