



Constructing the Nation: Representation of National Identity in Pakistani English Language Textbooks

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ARTICLE INFO

Received:

June 01, 2026

Revision Received:

June 14, 2026

Accepted:

July 03, 2026

Available Online:

July 17, 2026

Keywords:

national identity; textbook representation; content analysis; Pakistani English textbooks; social constructionism; ELT curriculum; religious discourse; identity construction

ABSTRACT

In Pakistani classrooms, the textbook usually is the lesson. It is often the only resource students and teachers have, which means whatever a textbook chooses to say about language, culture, or belonging tends to arrive largely unchallenged. This matters for English in particular, since English carries official status in Pakistan and is widely treated as a mark of modern, educated life. Yet how national identity gets built into English-medium textbooks specifically has drawn surprisingly little sustained attention. This study looks at two secondary-level textbooks used under the Punjab curriculum, English-9 and English-10, and asks two things: what elements of national identity dominate their content, and how are those elements represented. Working from social constructionism and identity theory, the analysis codes nineteen locally authored units against five categories: history, language, culture, sovereignty, and religion. Religion turns out to carry the most weight, and not as an isolated theme; it runs through the historical, linguistic, and political content as well, anchoring most of what the textbooks present as distinctly Pakistani. The resulting picture of national identity is coherent and pedagogically effective, but narrow, with limited room for the country's religious, ethnic, and linguistic diversity. The paper closes by considering what this means for curriculum designers, teachers, and students trying to read these materials critically.

1. Introduction

English holds an odd dual position in Pakistan. It is a compulsory school subject from the early grades, and at the same time it functions as the language of government paperwork and international dealings. Pennycook (2017) captures this well: English in Pakistan signals modernity and access as much as it teaches grammar. Because textbooks are, for most students, the only sustained encounter with English instruction they get, what those textbooks contain does more than build vocabulary. It shapes how students come to understand their own history and their place within the nation (Hussain, Sandaran, & Saeed, 2023).

National identity itself is not something a person is simply born into. It is built, and rebuilt, through state rituals, everyday routines, and, crucially, education (Edensor, 2002). He and Yan (2008) describe it as the sense of belonging that ties individuals

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to a shared cultural and historical community. Schools sit at the centre of this process. Curricula translate the larger national story into something students absorb almost incidentally, alongside grammar exercises and reading comprehension.

Research on how Pakistani educational materials handle this task has developed unevenly. Studies of Pakistan Studies and Urdu-medium textbooks are relatively plentiful, and most reach a similar conclusion: these materials favour a Muslim-centric, Islamist account of nationhood, with little room for the country's ethnic and religious diversity (Muhammad & Brett, 2015; Durrani, 2008). English-medium textbooks have received far less attention, and what attention they have received tends to zero in on one thing at a time. Khokhar (2017) looks at how Islamic themes dominate English and Urdu textbooks. Jat, Pathan, and Shah (2018) look specifically at how national heroes are portrayed. Hussain, Sandaran, and Saeed (2023) focus on cultural representation in ESL textbooks. Each of these studies is useful on its own terms, but none of them asks how religion, history, culture, and politics might work together within the same textbook content.

That gap is worth taking seriously, and not just as a matter of academic completeness. If a textbook routinely folds a religious claim and a nationalist claim into the same passage, the two reinforce each other in ways a single-topic study would simply miss. A reader who only ever traces religion, say, would come away with a partial and probably understated sense of how forcefully the text is building a particular version of national belonging. That has practical consequences too: curriculum designers working from a series of disconnected findings about religion here and heroes there are not well placed to see where the real gaps in representation lie. The stakes are higher for English textbooks than for Pakistan Studies or Urdu materials, precisely because English is not usually read as an ideological subject. A lesson framed as language practice is less likely to be scrutinised than one framed as civics or religious studies, even if it is doing comparable work (Curd-Christiansen & Weninger, 2015; Gheitasi, Aliakbari, & Khany, 2022).

This study addresses that gap directly, examining English-9 and English-10, both published by the Punjab Curriculum and Textbook Board (PCTB) and used across government schools in Punjab. Drawing on Kim's (2010) social constructionism and Blommaert's (2005) identity theory, the analysis treats textbook content as an active site of identity construction rather than a neutral delivery mechanism for language skills. Two questions guide the study:

1. RQ1: What are the dominant elements of national identity represented in a sample of Pakistani English textbooks?
2. RQ2: How is national identity represented in Pakistani English textbooks?

By treating these elements as interacting rather than separate, the study aims to offer a more complete account of what these textbooks are doing, one with direct relevance for students learning to read critically, for teachers deciding how to frame lessons, and for curriculum designers weighing what to include next.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Identity and National Identity as Social Constructs

Most contemporary accounts of identity reject the idea that it is a fixed possession. Blommaert (2005) treats identity as something continually built and communicated through symbols, stories, and textual forms, and as always situated within overlapping categories such as age, profession, nationality, or cultural background. Norton (2013) makes a similar point from a different angle, describing identity as an individual's evolving sense of their relationship to the world, constructed largely through language. National identity works the same way at a collective scale. He and Yan (2008) define it as the sense of belonging that binds individuals to a shared community of culture, history, values, and language. Smith (1992) warns against treating this as settled or simple; national identity shifts constantly under social, cultural, and political pressure, and it is typically built through the invocation of familiar markers, shared history, language, religion, that Mansbach and Rhodes (2007) describe as points of reference rather than fixed facts.

2.2. Textbooks as Ideological Texts

Textbooks are rarely neutral, whatever they might claim about themselves. Cortazzi and Jin (1999) describe them as performing several roles at once, teacher, map, authority, and, not incidentally, vehicle for ideology. Since learning a second language usually means absorbing some of the cultural values embedded in it, protecting a particular version of national identity becomes a real concern for textbook designers, especially outside English-speaking countries (Curd-Christiansen & Weninger, 2015). This is not only about defence. Textbooks actively select which stories to tell and which to leave out, and in doing so they can promote patriotism, entrench specific ideologies, or reinforce social hierarchies that have little to do with language learning as such. Research on earlier-grade Pakistani textbooks, for instance, has documented persistent patriarchal norms and gendered role divisions, which suggests the ideological work of these materials reaches well beyond questions of national or religious identity alone (Agha, Syed, & Mirani, 2018).

2.3. National Identity in Pakistani Educational Materials

Across this literature, one finding recurs even as the subject matter changes: Pakistani educational materials tend to build a religiously and culturally homogeneous version of the nation. Pakistan Studies textbooks are consistently found to be Muslim-centric and Islamist in orientation, offering little space for ethnic, religious, or global diversity despite official policy language calling for exactly that (Muhammad & Brett, 2015; Durrani, 2008). Work on Sindhi-medium primary textbooks reaches a comparable conclusion about patriarchal and exclusionary framings of citizenship (Agha, Syed, & Mirani, 2018).

Within English-medium materials specifically, the picture is thinner but points the same direction. Khokhar (2017) finds that Pakistani English and Urdu textbooks construct a narrow, Islam-centric national identity, one that implicitly defines Pakistani (Muslim) belonging against an unnamed other, often through gendered contrasts. Jat, Pathan, and Shah (2018) trace how national heroes are used in English textbooks in Sindh, underscoring the role historical figures play in building patriotic feeling. Hussain, Sandaran, and Saeed (2023) turn to cultural content specifically, finding that Pakistani ESL textbooks lean heavily toward source, meaning Pakistani, culture rather than the culture of English-speaking countries. Taken individually, each study captures a real pattern. None of them, though, looks at whether these patterns interact within the same textbook units, which is precisely the question this paper takes up.

2.4. Theoretical Framework

Two frameworks anchor this study. Social constructionism, following Kim (2010), holds that meaning is not built into objects, events, or texts but is produced through social interaction in specific contexts (Van Leeuwen, 1996). Applied to textbooks, this means treating them as active participants in constructing national identity rather than as neutral carriers of factual content, a view Berger and Luckmann (1991) had already laid out in their broader account of how social reality gets built. Blommaert's (2005) identity theory adds a discursive layer to this: identity is achieved through symbolic means, narratives, styles, textual genres, and it operates partly through a process of othering, where collective belonging is defined in contrast to some excluded or contrasting group.

Together, these two frameworks point the analysis toward two linked questions: which elements of national identity show up most often in the textbook content, and through what discursive means, figures, places, values, norms, roles, language choices, those elements reach the student reader. This combined lens is what distinguishes the present study from the single-dimension work reviewed above, and it structures the content analysis reported in the next section.

2.5. Summary

The literature agrees that Pakistani educational materials, whatever the subject or medium, tend to build a particular and fairly narrow vision of national belonging. What it has not done is examine the full set of relevant elements together within English-medium textbooks specifically. This study takes up that task using a five-element framework grounded in social constructionism and identity theory.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The study uses a qualitative design, chosen because the elements under investigation, historical content, language, culture, sovereignty, religion, are meaning-laden in ways that resist numerical treatment. Producing a holistic, detailed account of how these elements appear in the textbooks calls for close textual analysis rather than statistical summary (Liu, Song, Yang, & Shen, 2021; William, 2017).

3.2. Research Paradigm

The study sits within an interpretive paradigm. Reality, in this view, is multifaceted and built through social interaction, shared knowledge, and historical context (Merriam, 2001). This means the researcher's interpretive judgment plays an acknowledged role throughout, and the findings are treated as context-specific rather than statistically generalisable (Guba & Lincoln, 1998). The aim is depth and traceability, not population-level claims.

3.3. Data Source

The data come from two PCTB-published textbooks used for English instruction in Punjab's government secondary schools: English-9 (2017, 12 units) and English-10 (2017, 13 units). Both are centrally produced under the same curriculum authority, which makes them a reasonably representative snapshot of state-sanctioned English instruction at this level.

3.4. Sampling

Textbooks were selected purposively based on the presence of national-identity content across their units. Within each textbook, units written by non-local authors were excluded, since the focus here is on locally authored material specifically relevant to Pakistani national identity. Three units were dropped from English-9 (Wordsworth's "Daffodils," Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," and Helen Keller's "Three Days to See") and three from English-10 ("Try Again" by W. E. Hickson, "The Rain" by W. H. Davies, and "Peace" by Dr. Hartmann). What remained was 9 units from English-9 and 10 from English-10, nineteen units in total.

3.5. Analytical Framework

The analysis organises content around five dominant elements, each broken into subcategories consistent with the study's theoretical grounding: historical elements (figures, places, roles); language (national language, including religious markers within it); culture (social values, norms, roles); sovereignty (national figures, symbols, values, roles); and religion (figures, places, beliefs, values, norms, roles).

3.6. Data Collection

A checklist built from this framework served as the main data collection tool. It specified the five elements and their subcategories and was used to pull relevant excerpts from the sampled units, each tagged with its unit and page reference, so every coded excerpt could be traced back to its exact source.

3.7. Data Analysis

Data were analysed through qualitative content analysis, which works by isolating significant elements of a text and organising them within an interpretive structure (Kleinheksel, Rockich-Winston, Tawfik, & Wyatt, 2020). Following Lindgren, Lundman, and Graneheim (2020), excerpts were coded against the checklist categories, grouped, and then sorted into the five thematic elements. Coding proceeded in a single tier: an excerpt was first flagged as relevant to national identity, then assigned to its element and subcategory (Pu, Tanamee, & Jiang, 2022).

3.8. Ethical Considerations

Because the data consist entirely of publicly available, government-published textbooks rather than human participants, no informed consent or participant-protection procedures applied. All excerpts are reproduced with accurate unit and page references to preserve traceability and respect the integrity of the source material. [Information Needed: a statement on institutional ethics approval or exemption, if one was formally obtained.]

3.9. Trustworthiness and Validity

Trustworthiness rests mainly on the structured, theory-derived checklist, which kept coding decisions anchored to explicit, pre-defined categories, and on the practice of cross-referencing every coded excerpt to its exact unit and page location, which makes the coding process auditable. The interpretive nature of the design is not treated here as a weakness to correct but as a paradigmatic choice consistent with the study's aims: the findings are meant to be context-rich rather than statistically generalisable (Guba & Lincoln, 1998).

4. Results

Across the nineteen sampled units, five dominant elements of national identity emerged, historical elements, language, culture, sovereignty, and religion, each carried through a recurring set of figures, places, values, norms, and roles. The results below address both research questions together: which elements dominate, and how each is represented.

Theme 1: Historical Elements

Explanation: Historical content appeared in eight of the nineteen units and centred on two strands that turned out to overlap constantly: the life of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and early Islamic figures, and the independence narrative built around Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah. History here is not really chronology. It is framed consistently to highlight sacrifice, moral guidance, and nation-building.

"Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah was a nation builder and a great patriot" (English-9, Unit 2, p. 13)

"The villagers ask Hazrat Umar Farooq to delay the execution" (English-10, Unit 13, p. 154)

Interpretation: Religious and nationalist figures sit inside the same thematic category, which suggests that history in these textbooks is not a neutral timeline but a selectively built narrative fusing Islamic heritage with the independence movement, in line with Anderson's (2006) and Gellner's (1983) argument that national identity leans on the selective use of historical figures and events to build collective pride.

Theme 2: Language

Explanation: Six units engaged explicitly with national language, and the content leaned almost entirely on religious linguistic markers, Quranic verses, Arabic honorifics, Urdu religious terminology, rather than treating Urdu as a general national vernacular.

"Everyone in the mosque can see and hear the imam" (English-9, Unit 7, p. 75)

One unit repeats the honorific "sallahu alaihi wa alihi wa sallam" (peace be upon him and his family) roughly forty times (English-9, Unit 4, pp. 32 to 46), alongside Urdu and Arabic terms such as "gar-e-suur" and "Masjid-e-Nabawi."

Interpretation: If "national language" content is really carrying religious vocabulary this consistently, then language here is doing less work as a marker of linguistic diversity and more work as a vehicle for religious identity, which fits Zdzislaw's (2018) point that language transmits a nation's cultural inheritance across generations, in this case a specifically religious one.

Theme 3: Culture

Explanation: Culture had the widest reach of any theme, appearing in ten of the nineteen units, and covered social values (civic responsibility, public health awareness), social norms (classroom greetings, respect for authority), and social roles (professional duty, gender-linked caregiving).

"Noise pollution harms our health. Let's raise awareness and demand action from local and state governments to protect us from this silent threat" (English-9, Unit 11, p. 113)

"It is traditional practice for adults to give children red envelopes as a sign of wealth and prosperity" (English-10, Unit 2, p. 17)

Interpretation: Worth noting: the one unit that deals with a non-Pakistani cultural tradition, Chinese New Year, reads as an outside curiosity rather than a model of pluralism applied to Pakistan itself. So although culture is the broadest theme by unit count, it stays oriented around a fairly specific set of Pakistani civic and social values rather than internal cultural diversity, which lines up with Wagner (2016) and Smith (1992) on culture functioning as a bounded, identity-defining category rather than an open one.

Theme 4: Sovereignty

Explanation: Sovereignty appeared in only two units, but what is there is concentrated and rhetorically loaded: national figures (Jinnah, the military "martyrs"), the one national symbol identified in the sample (Nishan-e-Haider), and national values tied explicitly to religious and patriotic unity.

"The ideology of Pakistan was based on the fundamental principle that the Muslims are an independent nation. Any attempt to get them merge their national and political identity will be strongly resisted" (English-9, Unit 6, p. 64)

"We must develop a sense of patriotism which galvanize us all into one united and strong nation" (English-9, Unit 2, p. 13)

Interpretation: Two units is not much textual space, yet sovereignty content does a lot with it, tying political independence directly to religious identity. That fits Jackson's (2018) and Smith's (2020) definitions of sovereignty as self-governance, but here self-governance is folded into an Islamic nationalist frame rather than presented as a purely civic-political matter.

Theme 5: Religion

Explanation: Religion was both the most common and the most fully developed theme, present in ten of the nineteen units and covering all six subcategories examined, figures, places, beliefs, values, norms, and roles. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is the figure invoked most often, followed by companions such as Hazrat Asma, Hazrat Umar Farooq, and Hazrat Abu Bakr.

"In the fifth and sixth centuries, mankind stood on the verge of chaos. At this point Allah almighty raised a prophet from among themselves who was to lift the humanity from their ignorance into the light of faith" (English-9, Unit 1, p. 2)

"Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH) judged other people's affairs with justice and told his companions to be just" (English-10, Unit 1, p. 3)

Interpretation: Religious content is not confined to a handful of set-piece lessons. It runs across figures, sacred geography (Makkah, Madinah, and the Cave of Thawr), and belief statements, and moral norms, which is a strong indication that religion functions as the organizing axis the other four elements attach themselves to, consistent with Berger (1967) and Seul (1999) on religion as an unusually powerful source of collective meaning.

4.1. Summary of Thematic Findings

Table 1 pulls these five elements together, showing how many units each appeared in and what the main finding was for each.

Theme	Units (of 19)	Main Finding
Historical elements	8	Religious and independence-era figures fused into one nation-building narrative
Language	6	National language represented mainly through religious vocabulary and formulae
Culture	10	Widest textual presence; centered on Pakistani civic and social values, with limited internal cultural plurality
Sovereignty	2	Small textual footprint but rhetorically dense; patriotism explicitly framed in religious terms
Religion	10	Most pervasive theme; functions as the organizing axis for the other four elements

4.2. Cross-Cutting Pattern

One pattern holds across all five themes. National identity in these textbooks comes through as religiously inflected, historically rooted, and civically framed, with Islamic figures and independence-era narratives constantly reinforcing each other. Cultural and linguistic content, while present in their own right, mostly get channeled through that same religious-nationalist frame rather than standing as independent, pluralistic dimensions of identity in their own right.

5. Discussion

These findings build on, and to some extent reorganise, a literature that has so far treated Pakistani English textbooks one dimension at a time. Where Khokhar (2017) looks at Islam-centric identity construction, Jat, Pathan, and Shah (2018) at national heroes, and Hussain, Sandaran, and Saeed (2023) at cultural representation, the present study's five-element framework shows these are not really separate dimensions. Religious figures double as historical figures. Sovereignty is justified in explicitly religious terms. Even language content is carried disproportionately through religious vocabulary rather than functioning as a marker of linguistic plurality on its own. That is a fusion, not a coincidence of themes appearing near each other, and it offers a more integrated account of textbook ideology than the single-dimension studies could give on their own.

The finding that religion anchors nearly everything else lines up with what researchers have found in Pakistan Studies and Urdu-medium textbooks (Muhammad & Brett, 2015; Durrani, 2008). That convergence across subjects and mediums matters; because it suggests the religious-nationalist framing of identity in Pakistani education is not confined to obviously ideological subjects like civics or Pakistan Studies. It shows up in English instruction too, arguably with more consequence, given English's association with modernity and global mobility (Pennycook, 2017; Tamim, 2014). Language learning is usually assumed to open students toward global, plural perspectives. What this study finds, at least within this curriculum, is closer to the opposite: English instruction is being used, whether by design or by default, to consolidate a fairly narrow national narrative.

That said, the picture is not entirely closed off. Cultural content, even though it ultimately gets channelled through nationalist and religious framing, did include some genuinely plural material, most notably the Chinese New Year unit, which suggests the textbooks are not wholly resistant to non-Pakistani cultural content, even if that content stays peripheral rather than becoming part of the core national story. This fits Curdt-Christiansen and Weninger's (2015) point that foreign-language textbooks sit under competing pressures: projecting a bounded national identity on one hand, exposing learners to the wider cultural world tied to the target language on the other.

It is worth asking why this study finds a fused, interconnected structure when earlier single-element studies did not. The likely answer is methodological rather than substantive. Earlier studies coded for one element at a time, so a passage that folded together religious, historical, and sovereignty content, the description of Quaid-e-Azam's faith alongside his role in nation-building is a good example, would have been captured only partially, filed under whichever category that particular study happened to be tracking. The bundling identified here may not be a new feature of the textbooks so much as feature earlier designs were simply not built to detect. That has a broader methodological implication: single-category coding schemes risk understating how ideologically coherent a text actually is, even when each individual study's findings are accurate within its own scope.

Theoretically, this bundling extends Blommaert's (2005) account of identity construction in a specific direction. Blommaert treats symbolic resources, figures, narratives, genres, as the raw material of identity performance, but his framework does not by itself predict that different kinds of resource (religious, historical, political) would routinely be bundled within the same passage rather than spread across separate ones. What this study suggests is that, in a state-sanctioned curriculum, bundling may be a favoured strategy, deliberately or not: putting a religious figure and a nationalist claim in the same sentence is likely to be more persuasive, and harder for a young reader to pull apart and question, than presenting the two separately. That bundling effect looks like a plausible mechanism behind what Edensor (2002) calls the routine, taken-for-granted performance of national identity: the ideological work is spread so evenly across ostensibly unrelated content, a language lesson, a history passage, a moral lesson, that no single unit reads as overtly propagandistic on its own.

Finally, these findings sit in tension with, rather than simple agreement alongside, Hussain, Sandaran, and Saeed's (2023) conclusion that Pakistani ESL textbooks privilege source culture generally. What the present analysis suggests is a narrower claim: it is not Pakistani culture broadly that gets privileged, but a specific, religiously anchored slice of it, while other markers of internal diversity, regional, linguistic, sectarian, are largely missing even from the cultural theme itself. That distinction only becomes visible once culture is analysed alongside religion and sovereignty in the same framework, which is the main advantage the integrated design has over prior single-dimension work.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to see how national identity is built into two Pakistani English textbooks by treating five elements, history, language, culture, sovereignty, and religion, not as separate topics but as parts of one system. The central finding is that religion works as an organising axis, tying the other four elements together, so that historical, linguistic, and political content is routinely carried through religious framing rather than standing on its own. That bundling, more than any single element by itself is what produces a national narrative that reads as coherent and persuasive to a student audience, while leaving comparatively little room for Pakistan's internal religious, ethnic, and linguistic diversity.

The main contribution here is as much about method as about findings. Coding across five elements at once, rather than one at a time, shows that earlier single-dimension studies of Pakistani English textbooks, accurate as far as they went, simply could not have detected this fused structure. That points to a broader lesson for textbook research generally: analyses of ideological content in educational materials probably need multi-element designs as a default, not isolated thematic coding.

None of this argues for stripping out the historical and religious narratives these textbooks currently foreground; they carry real pedagogical and cultural value. The argument is for supplementing them, with more deliberate representation of Pakistan's minorities, and for building students' capacity to read these narratives critically rather than absorb them passively. For curriculum designers specifically, the finding to act on is the bundling itself, not any one topic in isolation, since that is the mechanism most in need of attention when revising materials toward greater inclusivity.

7. Limitations

- **Scope:** the analysis covers five predefined elements of national identity; other dimensions of textbook ideology, gender representation or socioeconomic framing, for instance, fall outside what this study set out to do.
- **Method:** qualitative content analysis and a checklist instrument capture textual representation well, but they do not reach how teachers, students, or textbook authors actually interpret this material.
- **Generalizability:** the findings are based on two textbooks from one provincial curriculum (Punjab) and may not hold for other provinces or for English-medium materials used in private-sector or federal curricula.
- **Timing:** the textbooks analyzed were the editions in use at the time of data collection; later curriculum revisions may have shifted the patterns reported here.

8. Recommendations for Future Research

1. A longitudinal study tracking how national-identity representation changes across grade levels and curriculum revisions.
2. A comparative study of national-identity representation across provincial and private-sector curricula.
3. Empirical work on how students and teachers actually perceive these textbook narratives.
4. A closer look at how national identity intersects with other social categories, gender and ethnicity in particular, within the same textbooks.

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