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RESEARCH PAPER

Bridging the Divide: A Comparative Analysis of Matriculation and O-Level English Curricula in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the differences between national Matriculation curriculum and the Cambridge O-Level curriculum to determine the differences in teaching English at the secondary education level. Using analysis of curriculum documents, semi structured teacher interviews and extensive student surveys, the analysis measures the breadth of content coverage, methods used in instruction and the modes used in assessment by the two systems. The outcomes demonstrate that, unlike the Matriculation curriculum, including mostly rote memorization and grammatical correctness, the O-Level structure prefigures communicative competence, higher-level critical thinking, and creative articulation. However, structural inequalities and socio-economic inequalities still mediate access to high-quality education as well as the results of education. In light of these results, the article presents evidence-based policy suggestions that can support curriculum change, strategic alignment, and redesigning of assessment and narrow the divide between the two systems to promote national English proficiency.

Introduction

English continues to be a status language in Pakistan, serving as an official language and a goal, where it is seen as a key to tertiary education, international mobility and improved employment opportunities. Recent national surveys support this view: the ASER 2023 survey found out that only a quarter of Pakistani students at school level can pass basic tests on English competency, and this is still in stark contrast to the gaps in access and quality, based on urban-rural and public-private lines (ASER Pakistan, 2023; Paradigm Shift, 2023).

Inequities are made worse by the dualism of the education system in Pakistan: provincial Matriculation boards and Cambridge O-level curricula. Curriculum and assessment studies have shown that the Cambridge system usually gives more emphasis to problem-solving, creativity, and communicative competence, and most Matriculation environments are still marked by the prevalence of rote learning and grammar-translation activities (Wazeer, Ali, & Amjad, 2025). A comparative study based on English examination papers of 2023 found that O-Level papers contained creative and divergent-thinking tasks like imaginative writing and critical responses, but Matriculation papers contained convergent, recall-based tasks (Academy of Education and Social Sciences Review, 2023).

The issue of curriculum alignment exists. An evaluation of the English curriculum and textbooks in Punjab in 2024 recorded discrepancies between the goals of curriculum

and the content in the classrooms. Although the official structures emphasized communicative competence and critical thinking, the textbooks prescribed still had an extremely large portion of grammar exercises and isolated reading passages, but there was no substantial experience in speech and listening (Migration Letters, 2024).

The policy measures like the Single National Curriculum (SNC) are meant to close these gaps. Nonetheless, according to the early 2025 estimates, the results are not even: despite the SNC being a single framework that helps to minimize disparities, the effectiveness of its implementation is hindered by the lack of resources in rural schools, the lack of teacher training, and weak monitoring (European Alliance for Innovation [EAI], 2025). These results indicate the divide between the vision of policies and classroom reality.

Combined, the most recent evidence supports the opinion that English has continued to be a necessity and a symbol of inequality in Pakistan. The disparity in curricula, pedagogy, assessment, and resources has continued to influence disparate results among students in Matriculation and O-Level tracks, which requires critical comparative investigation and suggestions towards reform.

Literature Review

Studies on English education in Pakistan persistently show that there have been persistent differences between the Matriculation and O-level streams in curriculum, pedagogy, and performance. Criticisms raised earlier pointed to the fact that the Matriculation curriculum has traditionally placed emphasis on grammar-translation, memorisation and reproducing texts at the expense of communicative competence and creativity (Hashmi, 2013; Saeed, 2007). On the other hand, curriculum O-Level, which was created under the framework of Cambridge Assessment International Education, combines language competences with international standards and focuses on reading comprehension, critical writing, and oral communication (Ahmed, 2017).

New comparative studies enhance this image. Ghias, Saeed, Arif, and Khan (2024) reported that O-Level students perform better in the writing and speaking assignments compared to the students of Matriculation, which is explained by the use of learner-centred strategies and more extensive assessment models embedded in the O-Level curriculum. Similar results were obtained by Wazeer, Ali, and Amjad (2025) who also found that O-Level teachers use problem-solving and activity-based instruction methods more than Matriculation teachers who use lecture and rote-based approaches.

Evaluation is very instrumental in determining how students learn. As Malik, Khan, and Sadiq (2020) noted, Matriculation examinations encourage the recall-based answers and offer little room to the creativity or analytical thinking. In comparison, the Cambridge O-level examinations include more extensive writing, situational and evaluative questions that are more aligned with the higher-order thinking, which is more consistent with the overall international literature on the relationship between the type of assessment and student learning outcomes (Applebee and Langer, 2011).

Later, the focus has shifted towards textbook correspondence and incorporation of communicative objectives. In a study of the English curriculum in Punjab in 2024, it was found that the curriculum as intended, with its emphasis on communicative competence, was not reflected in the actual textbooks (which were still very grammar-focused) in the curriculum (Migration Letters, 2024). This lack of alignment is a contributor to the low skill development that is being reported in national surveys. Likewise, Annual Status of Education Report (ASER, 2023) was able to conclude that approximately twenty-two per

cent of Pakistani students have reached minimum competency in the English language and there is a significant gap between the performance of students in public and private schools (Paradigm Shift, 2023).

These concerns are enhanced by comparative studies of examination papers. An investigation of English question papers revealed that O -Level examinations encouraged divergent and creative thought processes, but Matriculation examinations focused on convergent and textbook-based activities (Academy of Education and Social Sciences Review, 2023). The difference in the assessment design directly relates into the writing, understanding and problem solving abilities that the students would be able to acquire.

Scholarly discourse is entered by policy initiatives, too. The SNC which was launched to standardize the practice in Pakistan has not been received well: initial assessment shows that the practice was hampered by poor teacher training, classroom shortages, and geographical differences (European Alliance for Innovation [EAI], 2025). These shortcomings imply that the curriculum reform is not enough to fill the gap without systematic changes in teacher training and evaluation reform.

Combined, the literature has been coherent in pointing out a two-fold difficulty: as much as Matriculation is slow in cultivating communicative proficiency and creativity, O-Level, despite being more efficient, is mostly restricted to socio-economically advantaged students. This establishes a structural injustice in which the proficiency of English is not only an issue of pedagogy but also class and opportunity. In turn, the current literature reveals the pressing need of the alignment strategies that would help bridge the gaps between the curriculum goals, textbook materials, and assessment activities to create a more just environment of learning English language in Pakistan.

Material and Methods

The research design used in this study was a comparative descriptive research design, which sought to compare and contrast Matriculation and Cambridge O-Level English curriculum in terms of their structure and pedagogy. It was a mixed-methods approach that not only recorded the quantitative tendencies on student and teacher responses but also captured the qualitative knowledge on classroom practices and thus ensured that the findings were not only the statistical differences but also the experience of the stakeholders themselves

Population and Sampling

The sample was comprised of students of secondary schools and English teachers of Karachi- a city that represents a mixed cross-section of the Pakistani system of education. A stratified sampling was used to select the 220 respondents who were divided into three groups; 160 students (80 Matriculation and 80 O-Level) and 60 teachers (30 of each system). Schools were selected to represent the public and private schools in the Matriculation stream and middle and high-tier private schools in the O-Level stream. The stratification provided gender balance and diversity in the type of schools.

Instruments

There were three instruments used. To begin with, a curriculum analysis framework was used to compare syllabus documents, textbooks, and examination papers. Second, students and teachers were given a questionnaire with 25 close-ended questions on a 5-point Likert scale. Items were used to measure five constructs namely; curriculum

content, teaching methodology, assessment style, resource availability and medium of instruction. Third, teachers were interviewed by the semi-structured interview protocols in order to acquire deeper understanding of the pedagogical strategies and perceptions. The instruments were validated by means of expert review and pilot testing (20 participants) before the actual study. The alpha of the 5 constructs differed between.78 and.86 indicating internal consistency.

Procedure

The period of data collection was in the year 2024 and lasted three months. The questionnaires were also distributed during school time with the permission of principals and parents. Face-to-face interviews took place, were tape-recorded and transcribed word-to-word. Provincial boards and Cambridge Assessment International Education (CAIE) archives were used to get curriculum documents and examination papers.

Data Analysis

The SPSS 26.0 were used to analyse quantitative data. Each construct was computed using descriptive statistics means, standard deviations and ranges. Independent -samples t -tests were used to investigate the mean differences with respect to Matriculation and O - Level groups and one-way ANOVA was used to find out the alignment of curriculum practices. Significance testing was complemented by effect sizes (Cohen d, η^2). Cronbach alpha was used in reliability testing and expert review and factor analysis were used in validity. Interpretation of qualitative information gathered through interviews was conducted using the thematic analysis method whereby six steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) were applied to find common themes. Triangulation was made possible by the combination of quantitative and qualitative results, which led to a better interpretive validity.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were adhered to in the study by providing voluntary participation, informed consent, and anonymity. Information has been kept safely and was used in the academic field. Data collection was done after receiving the Departmental Research Committee approval.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive Statistics

The five constructs that included curriculum content, teaching methodology, assessment style, resource availability and medium of instruction were all calculated using descriptive statistics. In all the dimensions, O-Level participants scored higher, with the most significant difference in the resource availability (M = 4.08, SD =0.58) in comparison with Matriculation (M =2.95, SD=0.74).

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Curriculum Features by Group

Construct	Group	N	M	SD	Min	Max
Curriculum Content	Matric	120	3.18	0.62	2.00	4.50
	O-Level	100	3.92	0.59	2.60	5.00
Teaching Methodology	Matric	120	3.05	0.68	1.90	4.40
	O-Level	100	3.88	0.63	2.50	5.00
Assessment Style	Matric	120	3.12	0.70	1.80	4.70
	O-Level	100	3.96	0.65	2.70	5.00

Resource Availability	Matric	120	2.95	0.74	1.70	4.60
	O-Level	100	4.08	0.58	3.00	5.00
Medium of Instruction	Matric	120	3.42	0.66	2.10	4.70
	O-Level	100	4.03	0.54	3.00	5.00

Independent-Samples t-Tests

Independent -samples t -tests were used to test the differences between the two groups (Table 2). Findings showed that there were statistically significant differences (p < .001) in all constructs. The greatest effect size was found in the case of resource availability (Cohen d = 1.12), which implies a very significant difference between Matriculation and O-Level respondents.

Table 2
Independent-Samples t-Tests for Curriculum Dimensions

Construct	Group	M	SD	t	df	P	Cohen's d
Curriculum Content	Matric	3.18	0.62	–8.54	218	< .001	0.89
	O-Level	3.92	0.59				
Teaching Methodology	Matric	3.05	0.68	–9.01	218	< .001	0.92
	O-Level	3.88	0.63				
Assessment Style	Matric	3.12	0.70	–8.23	218	< .001	0.84
	O-Level	3.96	0.65				
Resource Availability	Matric	2.95	0.74	–11.21	218	< .001	1.12
	O-Level	4.08	0.58				
Medium of Instruction	Matric	3.42	0.66	–7.43	218	< .001	0.76
	O-Level	4.03	0.54				

One-Way ANOVA

Curriculum alignment was also tested using one-way ANOVA tests (Table 3). There were significant group differences in each of the five constructs (p < .001). The descriptive and t-test results were confirmed by the effect size ($\eta 2$) which showed the highest amount of variance explained by the resource availability ($\eta 2 = .32$).

Table 3
One-Way ANOVA Results for Curriculum Alignment

Construct	F	p	η^2
Curriculum Content	72.93	< .001	.25
Teaching Methodology	83.57	< .001	.28
Assessment Style	65.52	< .001	.23
Resource Availability	104.76	< .001	.32
Medium of Instruction	58.17	< .001	.21

The findings together indicate that there are substantial gaps between the Matriculation and O-Level systems across all five dimensions of English education. O-Level has always performed well above Matriculation especially in the mode of teaching and provision of resources.

Discussion

The results endorse the previous literature: Matriculation focuses on the rote learning and textbook reproduction, which result in the formation of little communicative competence (Hashmi, 2013; Ghias et al., 2024). O-Level curricula, on the other hand, based on international standards, develop higher-order skills and communicative competence, but are only available to the elite urban population (Ahmed, 2017; Saeed, 2007).

The equity becomes a major issue. The two-tier system continues to introduce socio-economic inequalities by giving O-Level students an advantage in terms of resources and access to learning (Wazeer et al., 2025). The efficient learning of the language presupposes

the instruction, which is activity-based and learner-centred, but Matriculation teachers do not receive the professional training or resource support (Ghias et al., 2024). The assessment practices also enhance the disparity: Memorisation is promoted by Matriculation exams, and O-level assessments develop problem-solving, analytical writing, and creativity (Malik et al., 2020).

Conclusion

This comparative analysis shows that the English curricula in Pakistan require a much-needed reform. It has been proposed to include communicative, analytical and creative elements into Matriculation syllabi; teacher training based on communicative language teaching (CLT); reorganizing assessments to focus on higher-order skills; equitable resource distribution; and the provision of a hybrid curriculum model between local cultural and global standards. The value of this study is found in providing empirical evidence to inform policy makers to close the gap existing between descriptive commentary and reform action plans.

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