

Culture in Iranian Non-Native High school English Textbooks versus Native Institutes English Textbooks

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Abstract

The current study attempted to compare two series of textbooks written by native English speaker authors and Iranian non-native English authors in terms of their inclusion of the cultural elements. The issue of culture was divided into two categories of culture beginning with the small letter 'c' and big letter 'C' (Chen, 2004; Lee, 2009). From these frameworks, seven themes for big 'C' and five themes for small 'c' culture were selected. Taking a discourse analytic design, the study closely examined the content of the samples selected from two sets of textbooks and compared the frequency of the distribution of the cultural elements to find the answer to research questions. The non-parametric statistical analysis of the collected data showed that the textbooks written by non-native (Iranian) English authors did not deal with English culture as much as the native speaker authors did. The results also showed that the themes of big 'C' interpretation of culture were more frequently found in both sets of textbooks. The study could offer some pedagogical implications and also suggestions for further study in the future.

Introduction

According to Guessabi (2020), language teaching means, inevitably, language and cultural teaching. Learning a language is, therefore, linked to learning the behavior of people in that society and learning their cultural customs. Moreover, the status of English as an International Language or lingua franca calls attention to the importance of culturally appropriate ways of communication in different cultural contexts. Learners need to be aware of different cultural values and behavioral patterns in order to successfully communicate with members of other cultures. English in the Iranian context is commonly taught within a context-restricted setting where language learning is molded mainly by classroom practices that embrace the use of approved textbooks and the teacher's supervision of classroom activities, without considerable support from any social contexts external to the classroom (Ghorbani, 2007). As such, the cultural content of the textbooks may not be natural and original, which may strongly distort the quality of EFL instruction as a whole.

The present study attempts to investigate the distribution of cultural elements in two sets of textbooks which are widely used in high school and private language schools in Iran. The cultural content in the selected textbooks is manifested in terms of some cultural themes adopted from the previous research (Chen, 2004; and Lee, 2009) which divide culture into several categories under the heads big 'C' and small 'c'. The first aim of the study is to compare the distribution of cultural themes in general in two sets of books. The second aim of the study is to focus on the distribution of big 'C' and small 'c' themes and compare their use both within and across the textbooks in question.

Literature Review

Westerhuis (as cited in Cheung, 2001) defines 'culture' as a matter of course among a people, ethics, rules, technology, human crafts, and art of a specific time or people. Culture in ELT materials has been subject to Consideration for several years. McKay (2000) states that "The reason for the use of cultural

content in the classroom is for the supposition that it will promote learner motivation” (p. 7). Therefore, culture is about understandings and the overall perspective from which one sees and interprets the world in any country and textbooks may be a proper device for language learners to learn and embrace these understandings and overall perspectives about the world. This strand, i.e. what culture is, will receive a little further treatment below.

Several studies have already been done aiming at exploring the cultural content of the textbooks using different models. . Recalling the significant role of culture in appropriate and authentic language use, Çakir (2014) aimed to analyze English language course books used in the sixth, seventh and eighth grades of elementary education in terms of culture-specific expressions in Turkey. The content analysis of the course books revealed that most of the teaching activities did not contain sufficient cultural elements. According to the results, the number of culture-specific expressions was not adequate to help learners in the authentic and realistic situations in the target language.

it is plain enough that textbooks carry some aspect of culture together with linguistic elements of the language. However, the outstanding point is to what scope and how culture is treated in the textbooks. Having this in mind, Liu (2013) carried out a study to identify which categories and themes of culture are presented in Chinese EFL textbooks for the university level. The textbooks were dominated by target culture among recognized cultural content, while international culture and source culture accounted for a very small percentage. It was also found out that among 19 cultural themes under big ‘C’ and small ‘c’ cultures, the main theme was small ‘c’ of ‘values’ and the absent themes were common small ‘c’ themes (i.e. ‘food’, ‘holidays’, ‘hobbies’ and ‘body language’).

Several studies have also been done in the Iranian EFL context examining the cultural content of the textbooks and also Iranian EFL learners’ and teachers’ attitudes to the cultural content of the textbooks (e.g., Ahmadi Safa, Moradi, & Hamzavi, 2015; Birjandi & Alizadeh, 2012; Riasati & Zare, 2010; Rostami, 2016; Sahrahgard, Rahimi, and Zaremoaeyeddi, 2009). Ahmadi Safa, Moradi, and Hamzavi (2015) investigated the nature of EFL teachers’ and learners’ perspectives on the intercultural competence potentiality of *Top Notch Series* which are used extensively in the Iranian institutional EFL context. To this end, forty EFL teachers and eighty-eight advanced EFL learners from private language institutes of Kermanshah, Kurdistan, and Hamadan provinces took a researcher-made textbook evaluation questionnaire including thirty-eight 5-point Likert scale items. The results of frequency analyses indicated that both EFL teachers and learners were satisfied with the overall intercultural competence potentiality of the textbook.

To pursue the objectives of this study, the following research question and hypotheses are formulated:

Research question: Is there any statistically significant difference in the frequencies of the use of cultural elements (both big ‘C’ and small ‘c’) between English textbooks ‘Vision Series’, written by Iranian authors, and ‘American English File Series’, written by English native speaker authors?

Null hypothesis: There is no statistically significant difference in the frequencies of the use of cultural elements (both big 'C' and small 'c') between English textbooks 'Vision Series', written by Iranian authors, and 'American English File Series', written by English native speaker authors.

Directional hypothesis: There is a statistically significant difference in the frequencies of the use of cultural elements (both big 'C' and small 'c') between English textbooks 'Vision Series', written by Iranian authors, and 'American English File Series', written by English native speaker authors.

Theoretical Framework

There are other cultural frameworks in the literature that specifically deal with the themes of culture represented in EFL textbooks. Due to the complex nature of culture, it is suggested to investigate the cultural load of textbooks by identifying themes of culture (big 'C' and small 'c'). For instance, Ashikaga, Fujita, and Ikuta (2001) defined two aspects of culture based on Allen and Valette's (1972) idea of themes of culture: concrete culture referring to big 'C' culture such as geography, history, and products, and abstract culture which refers to small 'c' culture including behavioral or thinking patterns. Using this framework, they carried out a study to investigate cultural content integrated with seven communicative EFL textbooks for Japanese students. The researchers hypothesized that abstract culture plays a significant role in intercultural communication; thus, more content should be devoted to it. However, the results of their study revealed that the seven textbooks emphasized the concrete culture to a greater extent (76%) than the abstract culture (24%).

In 2009, in order to examine the treatment of culture in EFL textbooks, Lee (2009) collected 11 Korean EFL conversation in textbooks and designed 22 themes for big 'C' culture and 26 themes for small 'c' culture based on Piage et al. (1999) and Hinkel (2001). He pointed out that all themes categorized in his framework were necessary for culture teaching/learning. The results of Lee's (2009) study showed that the majority of the cultural content of the conversation textbooks was dominated by big 'C' culture such as art, history, and geography. The researcher concluded that 11 EFL textbooks were not suitable for fostering Korean students' Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) since they did not provide any explication of small 'c' culture.

A considerable number of studies have applied content and frequency analysis to uncover the themes of culture in EFL textbooks. To recap, the knowledge of both big 'C' and small 'c' themes of culture play a significant role in learners' ICC. Thus, it is worthwhile to investigate cultural themes embedded in EFL textbooks to clarify the extent to which culture is represented in EFL textbooks. The current study employs Chen's (2004) and Lee's (2009) frameworks to decide on the themes of culture to be investigated and compared in EFL textbooks used in Iranian public high schools with those used in private language institutes.

Method

Design

The study follows a mixed-method design for data collection with the exploratory approach in examining the content of the textbooks selected. The cultural content is identified and quantitatively coded in terms of frequency counts, and then, percentages are calculated for the observed data. The research variable is the frequency of the distribution of the cultural themes in the selected materials.

Corpus and Materials

The selected textbooks for the analyses were Iranian high school textbooks known as *Vision Series* (Moghaddam, Kheirabadi, Rahimi, & Davari, 2018) which are designed and published by Textbook Publishing Company of Iran and employed by the Ministry of Education nation-wide in Iranian high school context. The books are used for three years of EFL instruction in Iranian high schools. The cultural content is identified and quantitatively coded in terms of frequency counts and percentages are calculated for the observed data. The research variable in the study is the type and the distribution of the cultural themes in the selected materials.

The analysis also covers the widely-used English textbook known as *American English Files* (2nd Ed.) series written by Latham-Koenig and Oxenden (2014), published by Oxford University Press, and used in most private English language institutes at various age levels in the country. The American English File books are in six versions designed for the elementary to advanced levels of English proficiency.

As the number of lessons and units in the two textbook series was not equal, a random selection of the lessons was done to make the comparison possible. Thus, from the 'American File Series' ten lessons were randomly selected to be compared with the same number of lessons and units included in 'Vision Series'.

Instruments and Models

The study employed Chen's (2004) and Lee's (2009) frameworks to decide on the themes of culture to be investigated and compared in EFL textbooks used in the Iranian EFL context. From these two checklists, seven themes for big 'C' and five themes for small 'c' were selected. From Lee (2009) the themes 'sports', 'dress', 'festivals/ parties/ ceremonies', 'family', and 'arts' were selected for big 'C' themes. From Chen (2004), 'music' and 'geography' were selected as big 'C' and 'cultural Value', 'food', 'holiday', 'greeting' and 'weather' were selected as small 'c' themes. These culture categories were investigated and identified in each lesson in two series of textbooks.

Procedures

The study began with the selection of two sets of textbooks that are commonly used in the Iranian EFL context. Vision Series including three textbooks are written by Moghaddam, et al. (2018), and used in national high schools across the country were selected to be compared with the American English File (2nd Ed.) series (Latham-Koenig and Oxenden, 2014) used in most of private English language institutes in Iran. From these books, 10 lessons were randomly selected for analysis and comparison.

Chen's (2004) and Lee's (2009) frameworks were used to identifying and codifying the occurrence of a cultural element. These frameworks divided the cultural elements into two big categories of big 'C' and small 'c' themes of culture. For analysis, the themes were taken one at a time and searched in each book. The presence of themes in each section was marked by the number of its appearance in that section. The obtained numbers were then statistically compared to find whether the two-book sets were significantly different in terms of culture presentation.

Data Analysis

The data collected in the study were in the form of frequency counts which were nonparametric in nature. Thus, we used Chi-square statistics as a nonparametric inferential statistics to compare frequencies in two sets of books. The level of significance or alpha level for testing the null-hypotheses was set to .0/05.

Results And Discussion

The research question addressed the frequencies of occurrence of both big 'C' and small 'c' elements of culture in the samples taken from two sets of books. Since the data were in the form of frequency counts, the nonparametric test of Chi-Square was run to examine the significance of the difference between the frequencies observed in each set of the textbooks. In this question, both big 'C' and small 'c' elements of culture were considered generally and altogether. Table1 shows the frequency counts of both big 'C' and small 'c' themes in 'Vision Series' and 'American English File Series'.

Table 1

Big 'C' and small 'c' Themes Textbooks Cross-tabulation

			books		Total
			Vision series	AEF series	
Big & small 'C' Themes	Sports	Count	65	148	213
		Expected Count	88.0	125.0	213.0
		% within book	10.3%	16.4%	13.9%
	Dress	Count	70	106	176
		Expected Count	72.7	103.3	176.0
		% within book	11.1%	11.8%	11.5%
	Family	Count	54	149	203
		Expected Count	83.8	119.2	203.0
		% within book	8.5%	16.6%	13.2%
	Arts	Count	74	100	174
		Expected Count	71.8	102.2	174.0
		% within book	11.7%	11.1%	11.4%
	Festival Parties Ceremonies	Count	9	20	29
		Expected Count	12.0	17.0	29.0
		% within book	1.4%	2.2%	1.9%
	music	Count	3	36	39
		Expected Count	16.1	22.9	39.0
		% within book	0.5%	4.0%	2.5%
Geography	Count	159	103	262	
	Expected Count	108.2	153.8	262.0	

	% within book	25.1%	11.4%	17.1%
Cultural value	Count	88	54	142
	Expected Count	58.6	83.4	142.0
	% within book	13.9%	6.0%	9.3%
Food	Count	47	77	124
	Expected Count	51.2	72.8	124.0
	% within book	7.4%	8.6%	8.1%
Holiday	Count	16	31	47
	Expected Count	19.4	27.6	47.0
	% within book	2.5%	3.4%	3.1%
Greeting	Count	13	26	39
	Expected Count	16.1	22.9	39.0
	% within book	2.1%	2.9%	2.5%
Weather	Count	35	50	85
	Expected Count	35.1	49.9	85.0
	% within book	5.5%	5.6%	5.5%
Total	Count	633	900	1533
	Expected Count	633.0	900.0	1533.0
	% within book	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

As it is seen in Table1, frequency counts for each theme of culture are found for the book series. For example, the cultural theme 'Sports' has been found 65 times in 'Vision Series' and 148 times in 'AEF Series'. The highest frequency in 'Vision Series' belonged to 'Geography' (159) and the lowest belonged to 'Music' (3). In 'AEF Series' the most frequent theme was 'Family' (149) and the least frequent was

'Festival, Party, and Ceremonies' (20 Figure1 shows the bar graph representation of the frequency distributions for culture themes in total. Almost all themes were more frequently found in the 'AEF Series' except 'Geography' and 'Cultural Value' that was used more frequently in 'Vision Series'. To examine the first research question, we formulated the null-hypothesis that there is not any statistically significant difference in the frequencies of the use of cultural elements (both big 'C' and small 'c') between two sets of books under comparison. The Chi-Square test was run to examine the significance of the difference and test the null hypothesis.

As it was mentioned before, the alpha level of significance to reject the null hypotheses was set to (.05) in the current study. Table2 shows the results of the Chi-Square test.

Table 2

Chi-Square Test for Total Comparison

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	116.306 ^a	11	.000
Likelihood Ratio	120.788	11	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	19.296	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	1533		

a. 0 cells (.0%) have an expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 11.97.

As it is indicated in Table 2, the p-value observed for the Pearson Chi-square value (116.30) was smaller than the alpha level of significance (.05) selected in this study. Thus, the null hypothesis was rejected and the answer to the research question was affirmative. The difference between the two frequency values was statistically significant. The cultural themes used in 'AEF Series' were more frequent than those used in 'Vision Series'. Table 3 shows the effect size of the statistical findings.

Table 3

<i>Cramer's Test of Effect Size</i>			
		Value	Approx. Sig.
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	.275	.000
	Cramer's V	.275	.000
N of Valid Cases		1533	

The results in Table 3 show Cramer's effect size. If Cramer's v-value is between 0 and .5, the effect size is small, but if it is bigger than 0.5, the effect size is big. The v-value observed in the present study was .275 which was significant but rather weak in size. On the whole, the finding was that both book series dealt with cultural issues; however, the books written by native English speaker authors dealt with cultural themes more frequently than those written by Iranian authors.

From the cultural themes known as small 'c' themes (Lee, 2004 and Chen, 2009) the current study focused on five themes including 'cultural value', 'food', 'holiday', 'greeting', and 'weather'. These cultural themes were spotted and counted in different parts of the selected textbooks. Table 4 shows the frequency counts in two sets of textbooks.

Table 4

<i>Small 'c' Cultural Themes Textbooks Cross-tabulation</i>					
			Book		Total
			Vision series	AEF series	
Small 'C' Themes	Cultural value	Count	88	54	142
		Expected Count	64.7	77.3	142.0
		% within Book	44.2%	22.7%	32.5%
	Food	Count	47	77	124
		Expected Count	56.5	67.5	124.0
		% within Book	23.6%	32.4%	28.4%
	Holiday	Count	16	31	47
		Expected Count	21.4	25.6	47.0
		% within Book	8.0%	13.0%	10.8%
	Greeting	Count	13	26	39
		Expected Count	17.8	21.2	39.0
		% within Book	6.5%	10.9%	8.9%
	Weather	Count	35	50	85
		Expected Count	38.7	46.3	85.0
		% within Book	17.6%	21.0%	19.5%
	Total	Count	199	238	437
		Expected Count	199.0	238.0	437.0
		% within Book	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

As it is indicated in Table 4, in 'Vision Series', the 'cultural value' had the highest frequency (88) and 'greeting' had the lowest frequency (13). In the "AEF Series", the highest frequency belonged to 'food' (77) while the lowest one belonged to 'greeting' (26). On the whole, the total frequency value for 'Vision Series' was 199 and for 'AEF Series', the total was 238. Figure 2 also shows the distributions of frequencies for five cultural elements.

To compare the two total frequency values, we used the non-parametric test Chi-Square. The results are illustrated in Table 5 below.

Table 4. 5

<i>Chi-Square Test to Compare Small 'c' Themes</i>			
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	23.876 ^a	4	.000
Likelihood Ratio	24.016	4	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	10.006	1	.002
N of Valid Cases	437		

a.0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 17.76.

As it is seen in Table 5, the p-value observed for the Chi-square value of 23.87 was below the alpha level of .05. The small 'c' elements of culture were used more frequently in the 'AEF Series' written by native English speaker authors than in 'Vision Series' written by Iranian authors. Table 6 shows Cramer's effect size which returned a v-value of .234 that was rather small and showed that the degree of the difference was rather weak.

Table 4. 6

<i>Cramer's Test of Effect Size</i>			
		Value	Approx. Sig.
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	.234	.000
	Cramer's V	.234	.000
N of Valid Cases		437	

From the cultural themes known as big 'C' themes (Lee, 2004 and Chen, 2009) the current study focused on seven themes including 'sports', 'dress', 'family', 'arts', 'festival, parties, ceremonies', 'music' and 'geography'. These cultural themes were spotted and counted in different parts of the selected textbooks. Table 7 shows the frequency counts in two sets of textbooks.

Table 4. 7

Big 'C' Cultural Themes Textbooks Cross-tabulation

			Book		Total	
			Vision series	AEF series		
Big 'C' Themes	Sports	Count	65	148	213	
		Expected Count	84.3	128.7	213.0	
		% within Book	15.0%	22.4%	19.4%	
	Dress	Count	70	106	176	
		Expected Count	69.7	106.3	176.0	
		% within Book	16.1%	16.0%	16.1%	
	Family	Count	54	149	203	
		Expected Count	80.4	122.6	203.0	
		% within Book	12.4%	22.5%	18.5%	
	Arts	Count	74	100	174	
		Expected Count	68.9	105.1	174.0	
		% within Book	17.1%	15.1%	15.9%	
	Festival Parties Ceremonies	Count	9	20	29	
		Expected Count	11.5	17.5	29.0	
		% within Book	2.1%	3.0%	2.6%	
	music	Count	3	36	39	
		Expected Count	15.4	23.6	39.0	
		% within Book	0.7%	5.4%	3.6%	
	Geography	Count	159	103	262	
		Expected Count	103.7	158.3	262.0	
		% within Book	36.6%	15.6%	23.9%	
	Total		Count	434	662	1096

	Expected Count	434.0	662.0	1096.0
	% within Book	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

As it is indicated in Table 7, in 'Vision Series', the 'geography' had the highest frequency (159) and 'music' had the lowest frequency (3). In the 'AEF Series', the highest frequency belonged to 'family' (149) while the lowest one belonged to 'festival, parties, ceremonies' (20). On the whole, the total frequency value for 'Vision Series' was 434 and for 'AEF Series', the total was 662. Figure 4. 3 also shows the distributions of frequencies for five cultural elements.

To compare the two total frequency values, we used the non-parametric test of Chi-Square. The results are illustrated in Table 8 below.

Table 4. 8

<i>Chi-Square Test to Compare Big 'C' Themes</i>			
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	88.514 ^a	6	.000
Likelihood Ratio	92.248	6	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	39.025	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	1096		

a.0 cells (.0%) have an expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 11.48.

As it is seen in Table 8, the p-value observed for the Chi-square value of 88.51 was below the alpha level of .05. The big 'C' elements of culture were used more frequently in the 'AEF Series' written by native English speaker authors than in 'Vision Series' written by Iranian authors. Table 9 shows Cramer's effect size which returned a v-value of .284 that was rather small and showed that the degree of the difference was rather weak.

Table 9

<i>Cramer's Test of Effect Size</i>			
		Value	Approx. Sig.
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	.284	.000
	Cramer's V	.284	.000
N of Valid Cases		1096	

Conclusion

The results indicated that big 'C' themes such as art, history, and geography were the most frequent cultural themes in the textbooks. Lee concluded that the textbooks did not provide any content regarding small 'c' cultural themes. The study showed that the majority of the cultural content of the conversation textbooks, used in Korea, was dominated by big 'C' culture such as art, history, and geography. The researcher concluded that 11 EFL textbooks were not suitable for fostering Korean students' Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) since they did not provide any explication of small 'c'. Similarly, Chen (2004) analyzed Chinese EFL textbooks in terms of representation of cultural themes and came to the conclusion that big 'C' culture dominated the content of the textbooks.

However, the results of the present study contradicted those of some researchers who investigated the distribution of cultural elements in textbooks. For example, the frequency and percentage of ten cultural themes (six themes under big 'C' and four themes under small 'c' culture) identified in three EFL textbook series – Top Notch (Saslow & Ascher, 2011), Summit (Saslow & Ascher, 2011), and Passages (Richards & Sandy, 2005) - were calculated and the results indicated that the top frequency cultural themes in Top Notch series were three small 'c' themes of culture including daily life, food, customs and norms and one big 'C' theme of culture, namely geography. Furthermore, the findings of the present study contradicted those reported by Liu (2013) who identified 19 cultural themes under big 'C' and small 'c' cultures in EFL college English textbooks for Chinese non-English major students. The results indicated that the top frequency cultural theme in listening tasks was small 'c' culture of value (58.08%).

The current has some remarkable implications too. Based on the findings of this study, in designing textbook materials, textbook writers should take into account both learners' and teachers' needs and preferences. If the materials are interesting to the learners, they will be more motivated to be engaged in the process of learning the language and culture. Moreover, textbook developers need to make use of a variety of tasks, activities, and topics to appeal to different learners. EFL teachers should also do their best to understand learners' cultural preferences and provide them with additional materials such as storybooks, videos, and pictures if there is not sufficient culture-related content in the textbooks. Teachers can be trained in using different strategies and techniques to involve learners actively in culture-related tasks and activities.

The main limitation, in the present study, was the number of textbooks that were under investigation. The textbooks entitled '*Vision Series*' that are used in Iranian public high schools include only three books each with three to four units; therefore, in order to keep the balance, the researcher selected only ten units from the textbook '*American English File*' for analysis, although this textbook has several versions and more than 50 units. Thus, more studies with a larger number of samples are required before drawing solid conclusions. Further research is needed to include more textbooks written by native and nonnative authors before reaching valid generalizations. The current study adopted a simple comparative design to investigate the distribution of cultural themes in two series of textbooks. More studies with other designs are needed to probe more deeply into the issue of mixing culture with language teaching. Descriptive and

survey designs are suggested for future studies in which the teacher's and students' attitudes and perceptions towards the integration of culture and language are investigated.

Abbreviations

ICC Intercultural Communication Competence

EFL English as a Foreign Language

AEF American English File AEF

Declarations

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Authors' contributions

The authors collaborated to collect the data, analyze, read and approved the final manuscript.

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Availability of data and materials

The data will be available upon request.

Competing interests

The author has no competing interests.

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Figures

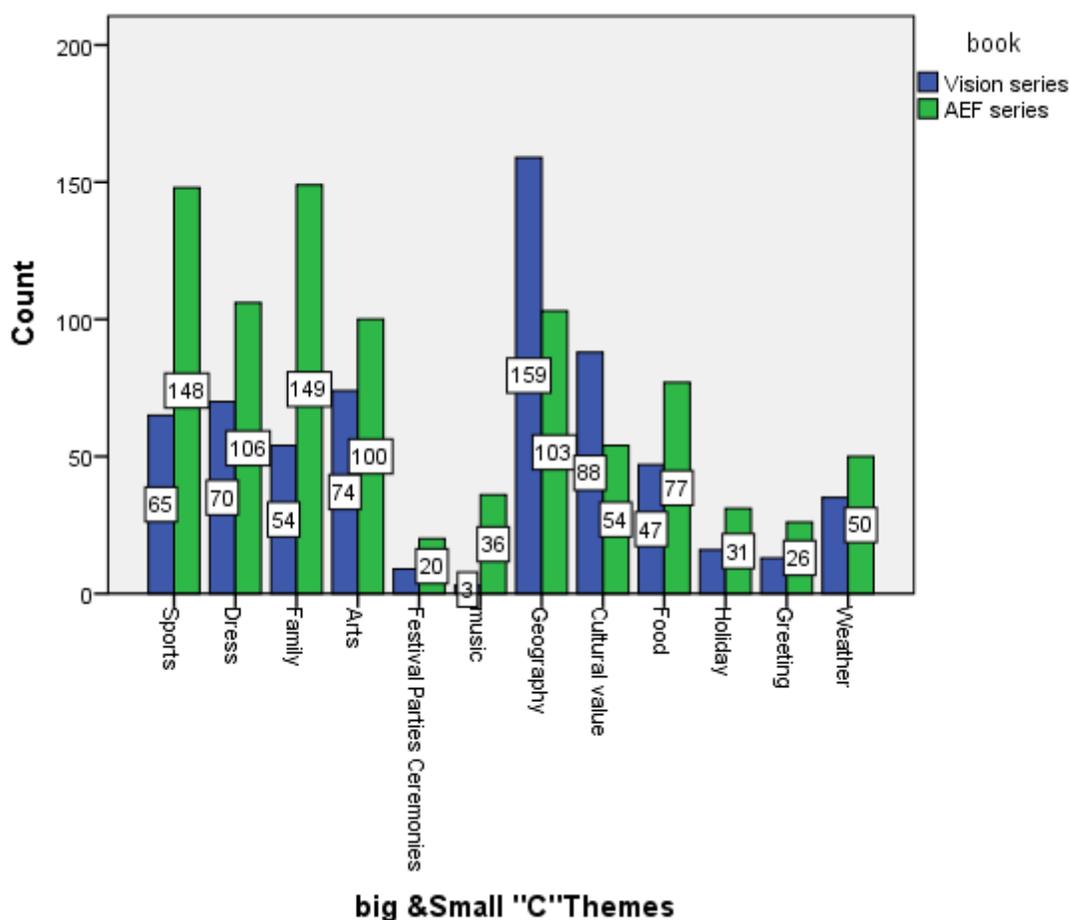


Figure 1

Big 'C' and small 'c' Themes in two Textbook Series in Total

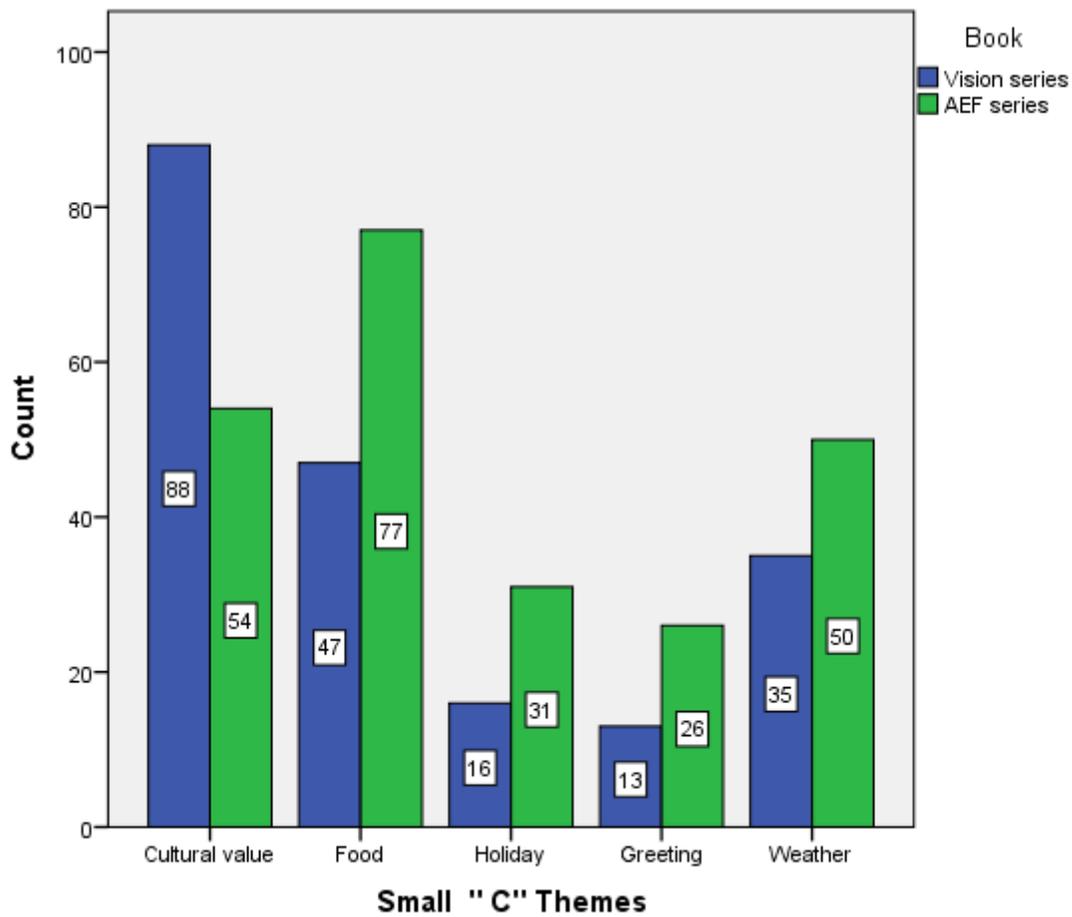


Figure 2

Small 'c' Frequencies in Two Sets of Textbooks

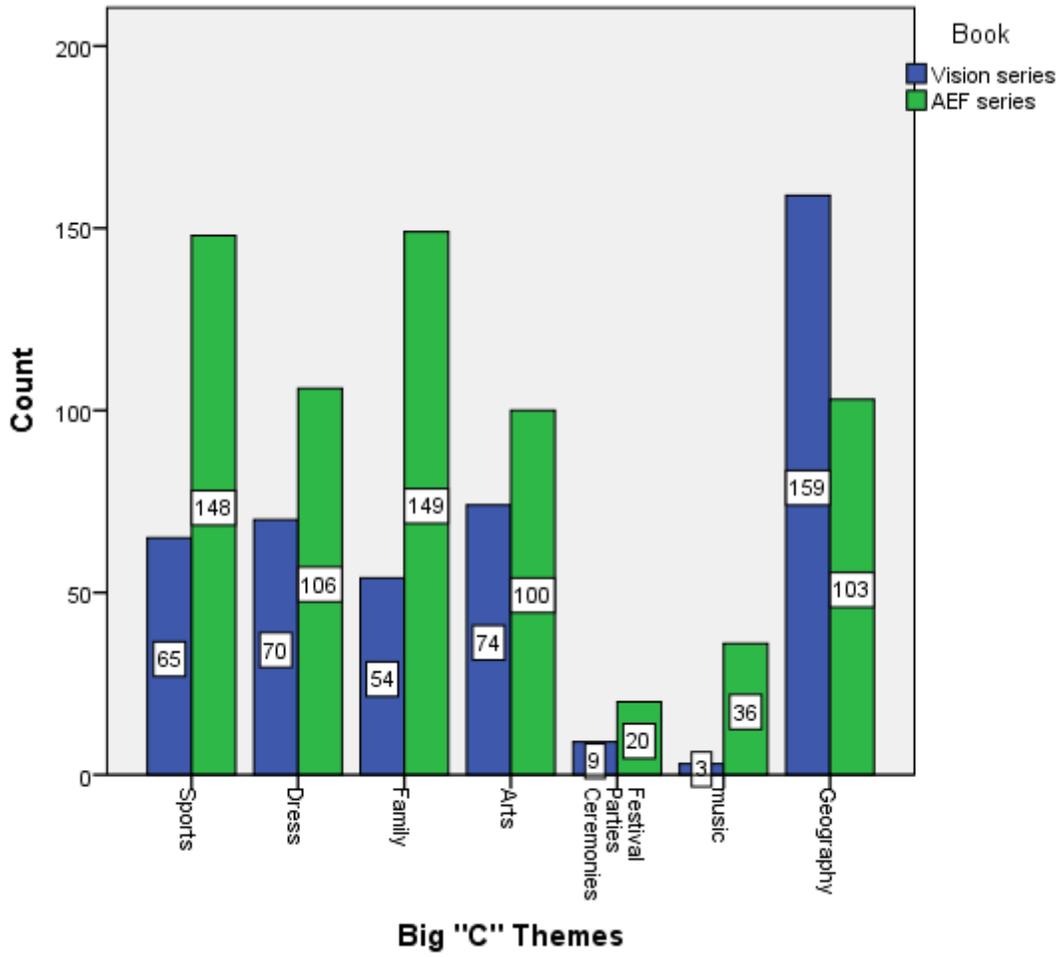


Figure 3

Big 'C' Frequencies in Two Sets of Textbooks