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Making Discursive Absence Analysable: Comparability and Inferential Limits in Eco-Critical EFL/ESL Textbook Research

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Abstract

A non-mention in a language textbook is not necessarily evidence of discursive absence, and nature-rich units are not automatically comparable. Corpus-assisted research has developed ways to investigate absence, but small, pedagogically heterogeneous textbook samples may lack suitable reference-corpus baselines. This methodological demonstration adapts existing absence research into four qualitative warrants: functional comparability, analytical expectability, whole-unit location checking, and cross-case recurrence. Two purposively selected, deliberately imperfect units—a Chinese senior-high travel unit and a Sri Lankan Grade 7 nature unit—expose risks in theme-based matching and claims based on partial sampling. In the Chinese unit, a later video prompt complicates an absence inferred from the main reading; the Sri Lankan unit uses nature largely for language practice and description. A hypothetical pollution-unit example illustrates conditions under which a stronger absence claim might become defensible. The procedure supplies transparent stopping rules rather than a substitute for corpus-assisted analysis or evidence of national-level environmental patterns.

Keywords: eco-critical discourse analysis; discursive absence; EFL/ESL textbooks; qualitative inference; cross-context comparability

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1. Methodological Problem

Corpus-assisted studies have already treated absence as an empirical and comparative problem (Partington, 2014; Schröter & Taylor, 2018). Partington's intervention is itself a response to the charge that corpus methods cannot address absences, and the techniques he advances rely on distributional evidence that a corpus supplies. Contemporary corpus-assisted discourse studies (CADS) likewise ties corpus design and reference data to the research question (Gillings et al., 2023, Section 3). The present paper does not claim to discover absence analysis. Partington's typology separates absence from a sizeable corpus, from a limited set of texts, and from a position in a single text (p. 123); the levels below adopt that scalar logic for a dataset with no corpus at its upper end. The edited collection groups comparison-based routes into silence in its first part, alongside corpus-assisted and cross-media studies (Schröter & Taylor, 2018, Part I). This paper instead asks: how can a researcher specify the evidential limits of an absence claim when examining a few pedagogically unlike textbook units without a defensibly matched reference-corpus baseline?

Stibbe (2021) distinguishes manifestations of ecological erasure, including the void, mask, and trace; Huckin (2002) differentiates five forms of textual silence, including genre-based and manipulative silence, and warns that, without a relevance constraint, "virtually anything unsaid would count as a 'textual silence' in virtually any text" (p. 353). His remedy is contextual rather than distributional: analysing the surrounding context closely enough to establish what could have been said. Neither should be treated as having ignored the problem of identifying meaningful omissions. The narrower task here is to document why a particular item is expected in a particular textbook activity, what parts of the unit have been checked, and how far the resulting claim can travel. Corpus evidence remains valuable where a suitable comparator can be assembled.

2. Comparability Before Critique

The first warrant is functional comparability. Mountains, oceans, flowers, and forests may be equally visible in two textbooks but serve distinct purposes: travel planning in one; prepositions, factual knowledge, and imaginative description in another. Recent multimodal eco-critical textbook work attends to texts, images, and educational tasks, judging them against a declared ecosophy (Triyono et al., 2023); tasks there are rated for the ecological learning they deliver, not for the pedagogical function they perform. The concern here

is narrower and anchored differently: what level of cross-text comparison is warranted before interpreting a missing environmental actor, when neither an ecosophy nor a reference corpus supplies the expectation? In language textbooks, matching an ecological topic without matching what learners are asked to do may produce a misleading reference point, even if both passages contain the same natural-world nouns.

The analyst records genre, learner task, educational level, problem framing, and location within the unit. Differences in curricula and learner ages are not controlled away; they restrict inference. Where the functions diverge, the appropriate decision may be to stop a responsibility comparison rather than explain the mismatch as a national ideological contrast. This does not make unequal school levels inherently incomparable: it requires the analyst to identify the dimension that survives the difference, such as a shared representational practice rather than a common environmental curriculum.

3. An Evidential Progression for Non-Mention

Expectability is assessed against the issue the text actually constructs, not an analyst's preferred syllabus. An industrial polluter is not automatically expected in a cloud-description exercise. Where a unit instead presents environmental damage and requests causes or remedies, responsible actors become more plausible candidates for examination. Such an expectation is still a reason to investigate, not proof of deliberate erasure. An audit record should therefore name the candidate missing item and the textual trigger that creates the expectation; otherwise the analyst may silently import assumptions about what an environmental lesson ought to teach.

A whole-unit scan follows: a main reading may omit a topic raised by a video, discussion, project, or image. Repetition across functionally comparable texts is then required before a patterned claim can be made. These checks translate prior absence scholarship into a practical sequence for small textbook datasets; they do not replicate the distributional evidence that a suitable reference corpus could provide. Functional comparability is a prior gate for cross-case claims, whereas the four levels below state increasing kinds of evidence about an omission. A failed check is a stopping rule, not proof that the missing topic is unimportant.

3.1 Four Levels of Evidential Warrant

Non-mention → expectable non-mention → location-checked absence → patterned absence

Consider a hypothetical pollution unit identifying contaminated water and affected communities and asking learners to explain causes, yet repeatedly representing pollution without causal actors across its reading, images, and tasks. An actor is plausibly expectable, and the local non-mention survives a unit scan. Only if the configuration recurs in functionally comparable pollution texts—and plausible genre or task explanations have been checked—would a patterned-absence claim become defensible. This is a logical illustration, not an observed finding or validation of the fourth level.

4. Purposefully Imperfect Textbook Cases

The two units were chosen from materials assembled for an ongoing comparison of Chinese EFL and Sri Lankan ESL textbooks, not as a representative national sample. Both foreground the natural world, yet differ conspicuously in age group, curriculum, genre, and task. They were selected to stress-test two plausible errors: treating thematic resemblance as functional equivalence, and treating non-mention in a main reading as whole-unit silence. Their mismatch is the object of the methodological test, not a controlled comparison of national environmental ideologies. The Chinese unit supplies a checkable within-unit counterexample; the Sri Lankan unit tests whether abundant nature imagery by itself makes a causal-absence expectation reasonable. These complementary functions explain why this particular pair was chosen.

PEP Compulsory Book 1, Unit 2, "Travelling Around," foregrounds planning trips, reading tourist brochures, making reservations, and designing a tour (People's Education Press, 2019, pp. 23–34). "Travel Peru" presents the Amazon rainforest, Machu Picchu, and Lake Titicaca mainly as destinations (pp. 26–27). Industrial polluters or regulators are not foregrounded; yet travel planning, rather than environmental causation, is the main constructed activity. Their non-mention therefore does not warrant a claim of structural erasure.

Crucially, a later Video Time prompt asks whether tourism should be stopped in places such as Machu Picchu (p. 34). This does not amount to sustained ecological debate, but it defeats a stronger claim that tourism is never problematised anywhere in the unit. Sampling only the main reading would have generated a spurious whole-unit absence claim. Yet the video question does not establish that learners receive a full environmental-impact analysis: the claim corrected here is about the presence of a prompt that questions tourism, not about the completeness of sustainability education.

Sri Lankan Grade 7 Unit 9, "Our Beautiful World," uses clouds for spatial description, oceans for factual comparison, and flowers for naming and pollination; poems and stories support imaginative and aesthetic engagement

(Educational Publications Department, 2019, pp. 96–114). Environmental degradation is not established as a recurring problem requiring institutional remedies. The non-mention of corporations or regulation consequently lacks an adequate expectation base. Together, the units illustrate the limits of theme-matched sampling, not a contrast between two national systems.

5. A Four-Step Warrant Procedure

Applied in sequence, the warrants produce a checkable record: the candidate missing item, the textual trigger that makes it expectable, the pedagogical locations scanned, and the dimension on which comparability was judged to hold. Table 1 summarises each warrant and the limit it imposes.

Table 1. Four Qualitative Warrants for Assessing Absence Claims

Warrant	Question	Inference limit
1. Functional comparability	What are the genre, learner task, age level, and problem frame?	Stop a cross-context inference if the units are not comparable for that question.
2. Expectability	Is the unmentioned actor or cause relevant to the problem the text constructs?	Record mere non-mention when there is no warranted expectation.
3. Whole-unit location	Does the issue appear in readings, visuals, discussions, video, or projects?	Limit any claim to the specific checked pedagogical location.
4. Recurrence	Does the same omission recur in functionally comparable materials?	Withhold patterned and national claims without further cases.

6. Discussion

The examples show where a critical claim must stop: theme-based similarity is not functional equivalence; reading-level non-mention is not unit-level silence. The hypothetical example shows what further evidence would be required for a claim to proceed, without supplying that evidence empirically.

Partington (2014) and Schröter and Taylor (2018, Part I) already establish the importance of comparative evidence for absence. The contribution here is a task- and unit-sensitive set of stopping rules for small qualitative textbook inquiries where an appropriate corpus baseline has not been assembled. The

sequence makes the status of a claim explicit—observed non-mention, contextually expectable omission, unit-checked absence, or recurring pattern. It also indicates the next evidence to collect: a fuller unit, a functionally matched comparator, or a larger sample. None of these stages independently proves intentional silencing or a national-level ideological tendency; even a recurring pattern requires contextual explanation. The present two-unit demonstration does not itself reach the patterned stage.

Use of Generative AI

ChatGPT (OpenAI) and Claude (Anthropic) assisted with language editing, structural revision, citation checking, and formatting. The author reviewed the textbook evidence, analytical interpretation, and references, and accepts full responsibility for the manuscript.

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