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Evaluating the ESL Reading Texts for Intermediate Learners of English from the Perspective of Students

Yee Chiew Ling ^α , Chong Seng Tong ^σ & Ng Yu Jin ^ρ

Abstract - In order to provide an evaluation of the suitability of reading texts from the perspective of students in university-based intensive English programme, this study examined 53 international ESL intermediate learners' perceptions of reading texts for a period of 14 weeks reading proficiency lessons. Features evaluated include content, readability, exploitability, and authenticity of the reading texts. The participants responded to a textbook evaluation questionnaire to express their perceptions with reference to the features of the reading texts. Results indicated the extent of appropriateness of the reading texts incorporated in the programme's reading textbook used by intermediate learners of English. Further consideration must be given to text selection by including the aspect of authentic text presentation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Textbooks play a vital role in teaching English because they form the fundamental of language input learners acquire in the classroom (O'Neill, 1982 cited in Kirkgoz, 2009, p. 79). For this substantial reason, it is necessary to be aware of the importance of evaluating textbook for reading development, which enables teachers to exploit a textbook effectively for the benefit of their language students. The process of evaluating and selecting textbooks is complex and involves many different levels of authorities. Despite this matter of fact, textbooks are for the learners themselves. The selected textbooks should meet their needs as learners of English in addition to fulfilling the curriculum requirement of English language communication skill content (Byrd, 2001). Therefore, students' involvement in evaluating textbook should not be overlooked. The present study covers four main criteria that influence the selection of a reading textbook: content, readability, exploitability, and authenticity.

According to Nuttall (2000), the most important criterion in selecting a reading textbook for our students is the suitability of the content, i.e. the reading texts "should interest the readers – preferably enthral and delight them" (p. 170). The reading texts must have the quality to grasp the students' attention from the first line until the last line of the written discourse. In this respect, the content serves as an attraction in providing the sense of realness where the students are motivated to find out more about the gripping topic in-hand. Undoubtedly, there is a strong tendency for the students to get interested in the post reading activities in the process of gaining more fascinating insight into the topic. To maximize this plus point, teachers play a vital role to ensure the reading texts will generally interest a majority of the students, and at the same time, will not bring a sense of boredom to the other students.

Nevertheless, an interesting content should be accompanied by the criterion of exploitability – the second criterion of selecting a reading textbook. Exploitability emphasizes the important elements of both content and language that are the focus of a reading lesson. In this respect, the selected texts should facilitate students to become an effective reader with "the ability to extract the content from the language that expresses it" (Nuttall, p.172, 2000). Hence, the selected texts should have the potential to be exploited effectively to develop interpretive reading strategies or skills in making sense of any kind of text.

Generally, readability refers to the surface features of a text in terms of structural and lexical complexity, which in fact affects readers' interest and responses to a text. As claimed by Miller (2011), "longer words may demand more decoding of inflections, and longer sentence provide space for more clauses and intricate causal and phrasal embedding, again demanding more of a reader" (p. 36). Heilman, Collins-Thompson, Callan, and Eskenazi (2007) note that, the complexity of sentence length of texts should be increased as par of the reading levels of the intended students of second language, who are nevertheless in the process of mastering the grammatical structures of the target language. A high proportion of new words will discourage students to read more or extensively due to intolerable ease. The recommended number of new

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words is seven on a page of A4 size in an effort to provide a well-understood context that facilitates the process of learning new words efficiently (Nuttall, p. 175, 2000).

Finally, Crossley, McCarthy, Louwse, and McNamara (2007) note that authenticity in language use is crucial in reading in order to introduce students to the real context and natural instances of language. Authentic texts are used instead of simplified texts due to the importance of authentic texts in conveying the real message through the natural use of language. Nuttall (2000) suggests that a true discourse is needed to develop our students' text attack skills such as the capacity to infer unsaid message or meaning presented by the text implicitly.

The central question of the present study focuses on the importance of displaying the four mentioned criteria in selecting a reading textbook. Therefore, the present study aims to evaluate the extent of appropriateness of a reading textbook used by the intermediate learners of English as Second Language in university-based intensive English programme based on content, exploitability, readability and authenticity.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

a) Participants

A total of 53 intermediate learners of English, who were enrolled in Universiti Tenaga Nasional's Intensive English Programme, participated in the present study. Table 1 shows the students' backgrounds according to the categories of gender, age group, and educational background. The male students (n=47) made up the majority of the participants as compared to the female students (n=6). In terms of age group, young adult participants aged 20 to 40 (n=44) dominated the study. Distribution in the category of educational background was approximately balance; High School (n=14), Foundation (7), Bachelor (13), and Master's (19). All students were in their first semester of studying in the university before proceeding to the university academic programmes; Foundation, Bachelor, and Postgraduate Programmes.

b) Textbook

The ESL reading textbook (Active Skills for Reading: Book 3) used in the present study was implemented in 2009 as a main course book for the university's English intensive programme reading course. The students evaluated the textbook towards the end of the semester before taking their final examinations. In more detail, the textbook provides students with opportunities for exposure in the form of readings across disciplines in terms of economy, sociology, psychology, and biology. It was designed with a varied of challenging reading texts accompanied by excellent reading skills and vocabulary development exercises.

c) Questionnaire

A textbook evaluation questionnaire was developed with reference to several ESL textbook evaluation checklists (e.g., Skierso, 1991; Byrd, 2001; Miekley, 2005). With guidelines provided by Nuttall (2000), the questionnaire comprises of 17 items deriving from the suggested textbook selection criteria: content, exploitability, readability, and authenticity. Respondents were prompted to indicate their perceptions from a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly agree to Strongly disagree" by placing a tick in the appropriate box. Reliability Test was carried out on the items using the statistical analysis software SPSS version 18 with high reliability score of Cronbach's Alpha 0.821.

d) Data Analysis

The questionnaire data were analysed using a computer software programme. The frequency and percentage of the responses were generated using the descriptive statistic programme of SPSS version 18.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Following is a discussion of results for the ESL reading textbook evaluation based on the perceptions of intermediate students. This section is divided into four subsections in accordance with the investigated textbook selection criteria: content, exploitability, readability, and authenticity.

a) Content

The results presented in Table 2 below illustrate the percentage of response indicating the students' perceptions of the content of the used textbook. More than 65 % of them agree that they enjoy reading the texts and the texts make them want to read to find out more about the topics.

This finding shows that the textbook conforms to the first criterion where the reading texts in the selected reading textbook should interest the students. This might because of the reading texts cover different disciplines such as sociology, psychology, biology and economy.

b) Exploitability

On the other hand, Table 3 below shows the percentage of response that is drawn on by the students in indicating their perceptions of the second criterion, exploitability, of the used textbook.

The pattern is summarized in the table above which suggests that more than 56% of them agree that the reading texts allow them to make inference, apply what they read in their life, identify meaning of unknown words from the context, replace difficult words with simpler words, and new words are repeated for reinforcement. Therefore, this finding shows that this textbook conforms to the second criterion where the reading texts should increase students' knowledge and develop their reading skills at the same time. This

criterion is important in achieving the curriculum goals as well.

c) Readability

As can be seen in Table 4 below, more than 50% of the students agree that the passages are not difficult, the words are introduced from simple to complex, the sentence length is reasonable, the structural complexity increase gradually, and the new words are worth learning. Meanwhile, less than 50% of them agree that the new words are too many.

Overall, this finding shows that this textbook conforms to the third criterion where the reading texts are chosen according to both lexical and structural complexity. In other words, an appropriate reading textbook should consist of a reasonable structural and lexical difficulty that would not demand an overwhelming cognitive load from the students or readers. If it is overwhelming, it will definitely demotivate our students to continue reading.

d) Authenticity

Results presented in Table 5 below illustrate the percentage of response indicating the students' perceptions of the last criterion, authenticity, of the used textbook.

More than 60% of them agree that the textbook language is used in real world, the reading texts have real-life issues that challenge them to think of their viewpoint, and the texts are accurate and up-to-date. This finding shows that the studied textbook conforms to the last criterion where students are introduced to the real context and natural examples of the target language.

IV. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study as indicated earlier was to examine the extent to which the textbook used in the university-based intensive English programme matches the set of criteria for selecting a good reading textbook. Findings from the present study suggest that the textbook conforms to all the four important criteria of reading textbook selection. It can be concluded that the textbook is appropriate for students reading literacy development. Further research could be done on the aspect of authentic text presentation which has been overlooked by the present study. It is suggested by Nuttall (2000) that the other criterion of reading textbook selection is presentation, "how they (texts) should be presented" (pg. 170). The intention of presenting a text in an authentic appearance is to establish a context of practicality.

Table 1 : Students' Backgrounds (n=53).

Category		Frequency	%
Gender	Male	47	88.68
	Female	6	11.32
Age	17 - 19	8	15.09
	20 - 40	44	83.02
	> 40	1	1.89
Educational Background	High School	14	26.42
	Foundation	7	13.21
	Bachelor	13	24.53
	Master	19	35.85

Table 2 : Students' Perceptions of Content (n= 53)

Content	Percentage of Response (%)				
	SA ¹	A ²	U ³	D ⁴	SD ⁵
I enjoy reading the passages in the textbook.	21	47	21	9	2
The passages make me want to read to find out more about the topic.	19	49	19	9	4

SA¹ – Strongly agree, A² – Agree, U³ – Undecided or Neutral, D⁴ – Disagree, SD⁵ – Strongly disagree

Table 3 : Students' Perceptions of Exploitability (n=53).

Exploitability	Percentage of Response (%)				
	SA ¹	A ²	U ³	D ⁴	SD ⁵
The passages introduce me to new ideas that make think about things I	40	43	8	8	2

haven't thought of before.					
The passages help me understand the way others feel or think (e.g. people with different backgrounds, problems or attitudes from my own).	26	43	26	4	0
I was taught how to identify meaning of new words from context.	26	42	23	9	0
I can find out the meaning of some of the new words without the help of a dictionary.	19	38	19	23	2
Some of the new words can be replaced by simpler words.	25	45	21	8	2
I can find the new words in the subsequent chapters.	11	57	21	11	0

SA¹ – Strongly agree, A² – Agree, U³ – Undecided or Neutral, D⁴ – Disagree, SD⁵ – Strongly disagree

Table 4 : Students' Perceptions of Readability (n=53).

Readability	Percentage of Response (%)				
	SA ¹	A ²	U ³	D ⁴	SD ⁵
The passages in the textbook are very difficult.	4	25	30	40	2
The new words are worth learning at this stage.	32	47	13	6	2
The new words are not too many.	6	26	23	36	9
The new words are introduced from simple to complex words.	6	59	26	6	4
The sentence length is reasonable for me.	11	47	34	8	0
The sentence structures gradually increase in complexity.	6	53	38	4	0

SA¹ – Strongly agree, A² – Agree, U³ – Undecided or Neutral, D⁴ – Disagree, SD⁵ – Strongly disagree

Table 5 : Students' Perceptions of Authenticity (n=53).

Authenticity	Percentage of Response (%)				
	SA ¹	A ²	U ³	D ⁴	SD ⁵
The passages use language that is used in real world.	25	38	21	6	11
The passages contain real-life issues that challenge me to think seriously about my worldview.	23	45	26	4	2
The passages are accurate and up-to-date.	17	47	32	4	0

SA¹ – Strongly agree, A² – Agree, U³ – Undecided or Neutral, D⁴ – Disagree, SD⁵ – Strongly disagree

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