

EFL Textbook Evaluation: An Analysis of Readability and Vocabulary Profiler of Four Corners Book Series

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate whether there is any significant relationship between the readability and vocabulary profile including the most frequent words (K1 words) and academic word list (AWL) of reading passages of Four Corners series which were EFL textbooks. To determine the readability of the texts, the Flesch–Kincaid (1975) readability test was used, while the texts' academic word list and most frequent words which were the indicators of vocabulary profiler were calculated by Cobb's (2002) vocabulary profiler test. In order to analyze the data obtained Pearson Product-Moment correlation coefficients were exploited. With respect to the relationship between readability and most frequent words, there was no significant correlation between readability and K1 words. This means that whatever the text is more difficult, the number of K1 words does not change while it was thought if the text is more difficult the number of K1 words is lower. Concerning the relationship between readability and academic word list, no significant correlation between readability and academic word list was observed, either. In other words, the readability of these texts is not due to their academic word list. It can be concluded that some other factors such as sentence length, syntactic complexity, and learners' background knowledge might contribute to the difficulty of the texts.

Keywords: Vocabulary, reading comprehension, readability, word frequency, K1 words, Academic Word List

Introduction

In the field of language learning, vocabulary knowledge has been equated with success in second language (SL) or foreign language (FL) learning with respect to different language skills in a large number of studies (Saville-Troike, 1984; Nation & Meara, 2002; Laufer & Goldstein, 2004; to name a few). Accordingly, the importance of vocabulary knowledge has been emphasized and vocabulary has been considered as one of the most essential components of language learning. Several studies in second language (L2) have indicated that vocabulary knowledge is one of the best predictors of reading ability and the capability to obtain new details from texts (Read, 2000; Nation, 2001; Qian, 2002).

Hu and Nation (2000) and Schmitt (2000) also hold the opinion that the amount of familiar and unfamiliar vocabulary is one of the most significant elements in discerning the complication of a text. Likewise, Stahl (2003) maintained that the relationship between vocabulary and reading comprehension is a "robust" one and that vocabulary knowledge has constantly been the "foremost predictor of a text difficulty" (p. 241). In this line, Alderson (2000, p.35) stated that "coping with unknown words affects comprehension and reduces reading enjoyment. Vocabulary knowledge is in fact the only and the best predictor of reading comprehension".

Concerning frequency level of vocabulary, Nation (1990) designed Vocab Profiler software which is a computer program which does lexical text analysis. It takes any text and divides its words into four categories by frequency: the first most frequent 1000 words of English (K1 words), the second most frequent 1000 words of English, i.e. 1001 to 2000 (K2 words), the academic words of English (the Academic Word List (AWL)), and the off-list words which are not found on the other lists.

Readability is a concept that relates to amount of comprehension of a text. It is defined as the ease of comprehension because of style of writing in *The Literacy Dictionary* (Harris & Hodges, 1995). If we ask a class of second grade students to define *readability*, they will most likely shrug their shoulders and give us a puzzle look. If we observe our classroom routine, we will soon realize that many of our daily reading experiences are shaped by the products of readability assessments, or "leveled books." Carrell (1987) uses the term to refer to the following phenomena: syntactic appropriateness; logical/rhetorical ordering of ideas; textual phenomena at the discourse level; lexical appropriateness; and background knowledge of the reader. Nuttall (1982) reserves this term only for syntactic and lexical considerations.

Having a clear picture about the quantity of vocabulary input in textbooks is particularly important in a foreign language learning setting, where there is serious shortage of natural exposure to the target language and thus learning, to a large part, depends on textbooks. However, in some ESL textbooks, the reading passages seem to be demanding for the students although they are supposed to be intermediate or advanced EFL learners. Indeed, the readability of the texts might not presumably correspond to the vocabulary knowledge of the students. If the passage chosen is inappropriate for whatever reason, the chances of success for that particular lesson are substantially lessened. As Day (1994) claimed, readability is concerned with a variety of factors including lexical knowledge, background knowledge, syntactic appropriateness, organization, and length. In the present study, just one of these factors was considered and thus, the question which was raised is whether readability of the texts is correlated with the vocabulary included in the text in Four Corners book series which is used widely in language institutes throughout Iran. To put it in another way, whether in higher level and thus more difficult passages, the number of frequent words decreases and, in return, the number of academic words increases in texts included in intermediate and advanced textbooks.

In this study through the analysis of reading passages of a series of textbooks (Four Corners book series), the readability of these passages was evaluated; expressed in a different way, it was tried to know whether the number of most frequent and academic words and the level of difficulty related to these passages were consistent. Indeed, whether the presence of these words was according to the level of the difficulty of the books. The null hypothesis which was formulated is: There is no significant relationship between readability and vocabulary profile including most frequent words and academic words in Four Corners book series.

Review of the Related Literature

Reading comprehension means understanding a text that a reader reads. It is the process of constructing meaning from a text (Wei, 2009). Reading comprehension is a process of decoding through the development of an extensive repertoire of sight words, learning the meaning of the words of the text, and learning how to recognize the abstract meaning from the text (Abd Al & Al Odwan, 2012). Many researchers and educators investigated techniques that improve and facilitate reading comprehension (Liang, 2002; Ghaith, 2003; Chen, 2005; Alhaidari, 2006). There may be different ways or strategies for improving reading comprehension ability of foreign language learners, one of which is concentrating on vocabulary knowledge.

Vocabulary knowledge performs a prominent role in future possibilities and people's lives (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002). Following the performance of English second/foreign language readers' encounter with strange vocabulary; researchers have commented on the prominent role of vocabulary as an indicator of general reading skill (Nation, 2001). Indeed, ESL/EFL readers frequently stated lack of sufficient word understanding as one of the major barriers to content comprehension, thus, vocabulary load is a very important cue of text complexity. Likewise, Haynes and Baker (1993) claimed that the most important disadvantage for L2 readers is not the lack of reading comprehension practice, but the inadequate comprehension of English vocabulary. To a large extent, what these studies reveal is that the threshold for reading comprehension is lexical. Lexical issues might, hence, prevent successful comprehension.

The notion of comprehensibility of a text is closely related to a most familiar notion in reading comprehension, namely, readability. Dale and Chall (1949) indicated that readability is the sum of the total of all those elements which a given piece of printed material has that affect the success of a group of readers. The success is the extent to which they understand it, read it at an optimal speed and find it interesting. According to Richards et al. (1992, p. 306), "readability refers to how easily written materials can be read and understood. It depends on many factors including (a) the average length of sentences in a passage, (b) the number of new words a passage contains, and (3) the grammatical complexity of the language used." The notion of readability is, of course, a controversial issue since researchers have found that linguistic complexity may not be detrimental to comprehension. Bernhardt (1984, cited in Chastain, 1988, p. 232), based on research findings, stated that "syntactic simplicity may decrease text cohesion and thereby hinder comprehension."

Carkin (2005) mentioned that vocabulary as a sub-skill of reading has a vital role in reading comprehension. It is almost impossible to separate reading from word knowledge for fluent reading (Grabe & Stoller, 2002). In defining the difficulty and readability of a text, vocabulary is generally found as the most important factor (Chall, 1958). Lexical knowledge is a critical necessity to comprehend texts and use the language (Nation, 1990; Nurweni & Read, 1999). The difficulties of lexical items appear to be the most difficult barrier to reading technical texts in the content areas. Cobb and Horst (2001) argue that lexical knowledge is the key component to comprehend the content in specific texts in both L1 and L2.

According to Lunzer and Gardner (1979), learners' understanding ability has something to do with sentence length since complicated sentences are generally longer than simple ones and naturally hard to process. Schulz (1981) also considered sentence length as an important factor that affects text readability, saying "The sentence length variable probably can be generalized as a difficulty factor in any language, since the short-term memory span necessary for processing and decoding meaning is limited for all humans" (p. 49). Another variable that affects readability is related to readers themselves. Schraw, Bruning and Svoboda (1995) and Hidi (2001) found that learners' interest has influences on text difficulty. Lee (2009) also showed that learners' attitude towards text materials is one of the factors influencing readability. Readability can be also influenced by other factors such as syntactic complexity of sentences, density of concepts, page format, intricacy of punctuation, and so forth.

Concerning the factors that affect readability of a text, Owu-Ewie (2014) put forward a range of factors including content, structure, style, layout and design as factors on which the ability to read and understand a text depend. These factors can be semantic or syntactic. Semantic factors are concerned with words, while syntactic factors involve the length and structure of sentences. According to Stephens (2000), five style factors likely to affect the readability of a text

are the number of pronouns, average number of words in sentences, percentage of different words and number of prepositional phrases. Essem Educational Limited (2007) has indicated a number of factors that influence the readability of a text. These include physical factors (such as typeface, font size, spacing and layout), reader factors (such as prior knowledge, reading ability, and motivation of the reader), vocabulary difficulty, text structure, text coherence and cohesion, and syntax. It must also be noted that the age of the reader is crucial to readability. Age appropriateness of academic material is crucial to effective learning. If the content of a text is above the age of the learner/reader there is bound to be difficulty in reading such a text.

Owu-Ewie (2014) investigated the readability of comprehension passages in Junior High School (JHS) English language textbooks used in Ghana. He used six readability formulas to analyze 48 comprehension passages selected from four English language textbooks. The study identified that the nature of sentences, unfamiliar background of passages were some contributing factors. According to the study, readability can be improved by the use of simple, precise and unambiguous sentences, well-structured text and use of familiar or cultural-friendly texts/genres.

Mirshojaee and Sahragard (2015) conducted a study and compared six Iranian general English university textbook's reading comprehension passages and the passages of reading comprehension section of MA exams from 2010 to 2014. The results showed that MA reading passages were far higher difficult in readability indexes than the compared textbooks, meaning that they were linguistically more complex, and challenging for readers to be comprehended. Moreover, MA examination passages had the least amount of the most frequent vocabulary in English—K1 word level—meaning that they were more demanding for the readers to read and comprehend because the K1 words are the easiest ones for the readers due to their frequency and the high amount of exposure readers have with them. Regarding the use of K1 vocabularies, most reading books' lexical coverage devoted to K1 vocabularies showing their ease of reading on the part of the undergraduate students.

By studying previous studies on readability and vocabulary profiler, it is noticed that, to the knowledge of the researchers, no research has been conducted to explore the relationship between these two issues. Hence, through the limitations of the previous studies, more studies are needed to enrich the literature. As a result, an attempt was made in this study to fill the gaps in previous literature.

Method

Design

This study followed a correlational design in which the relationship between readability, K1 words and academic word level (AWL) was explored.

Corpus

A series of textbooks entitled "Four Corners" authored by Jack C. Richards and David Bohlke (2011) was examined. There were four books in Four Corners book series for EFL learners with different levels of English proficiency, but only the intermediate and advanced books were selected for this study. The intermediate book (Four Corners 3) and the advanced book (Four Corners 4) each contained 12 reading passages and altogether 24 reading passages were analyzed.

The rationale behind selecting this book series was that Four Corners were among the books which are widely taught in English language institutes around Iran since it is an integrated four-skills English course for adults and young adults. Moreover, it is an integrated four-skills course for adults and young adults who want to use English to communicate effectively in daily

life. It is easy and enjoyable to teach. It combines proven communicative methodology with a practical outcomes-based approach. Four Corners features a clear presentation of vocabulary, a thorough grammar syllabus, and an everyday functional language lesson in every unit together with systematic practice of all four skills. It places special emphasis on helping students become confident and competent speakers of English (Richards & Bohlke, 2011).

Four Corners book series includes 4 books starting from number 1 to number 4. As it is true about all ESL/EFL textbooks, the first book is considered for the beginners; while the following books are regarded for higher levels of English proficiency. Generally, the textbooks developed for beginners either do not have reading passages or have passages which are very short and consist of most common and frequent words. Academic words or even the less frequent words cannot be observed in such textbooks. Hence, this issue provoked the researchers to use the intermediate- and advanced-level textbooks for the analysis of the relationship between readability and vocabulary profiler of their reading passages.

The corpus contained the readability index as well as the frequency of most frequent words (K1 words) and academic word level (AWL). The minimum and maximum indices of readability of passages in Four Corners 3 were 58.9 and 96, respectively; while such indices were 58.3 and 81.7 for Four Corners 4. When it comes to K1 words, the minimum and maximum indices were respectively 73.58 and 87.96 in Four Corners 3 and 67.18 and 86.57 in Four Corners 4. Finally, in Four Corners 3, the minimum and maximum indices of AWL were 0.71 and 7.63, respectively; while they were 0.26 and 8.52 in Four Corners 4.

Instrumentation

Each reading passage was subjected to two tests. The Flesch–Kincaid (1975) readability test was the test designed to indicate how difficult a reading passage in English was to understand. The second test was Vocabulary Profiler (Cobb, 2002) test which determined how many words the text contained from the following four frequency levels: (1) the list of the most frequent 1000 word families (K1 words), (2) the second 1000 most frequent words, (3) the Academic Word List, and (4) words that do not appear on the other lists called off-list words.

Text Analysis Procedures

To determine the readability of the texts, each text was copied and pasted into the Flesch–Kincaid (1975) readability test website. In this system, the score ranges from 1 to 100 and the lower the score is, the more difficult the text will be. Also the texts' "academic word list" and "most frequent words" were calculated by Cobb's (2002) vocabulary profiler test. The texts were copied and pasted into the respective website, then the token and percentages of K1 words, K2 words and Academic Word list (AWL) words were defined.

Statistical Procedures

In order to analyze the data collected, they were subjected to correlational analyses. Pearson Product-Moment correlation coefficients were exploited in order to verify the null hypothesis formulated, finding the relationship between the readability of the texts and academic words level as well as the readability of the texts and most frequent words of the texts.

Results

Readability Scores, K1 Words, and AWL

The frequency of the first most frequent words, the frequency of the AWL, and also the readability scores of Four Corners 3 and Four Corners 4 are represented below.

Table 1. *Readability scores, frequency of most frequent words (K1 words), and academic word level (AWL) of Four Corners 3 (Intermediate)*

Text	Readability score	Frequency of K1 words	Frequency of AWL
1	93.5	81.63	7.63
2	74.7	75.989	2.94
3	65.3	80.11	0.00
4	87.1	83.44	0.61
5	96	81.86	6.33
6	73.8	86.44	1.36
7	82.6	83.86	0.90
8	89.7	76.95	0.71
9	78.5	87.96	1.85
10	70.2	75.00	1.00
11	58.9	73.58	2.36
12	74.8	79.06	5.78

As Table 1 indicates, text 5 was the easiest one (readability score = 96) and text 11 was the most difficult one (readability score = 58.9). Also, the highest K1 (frequency of most frequent words) was 87.96 for text 9 and the highest AWL (academic word level) was 7.63 for text 1.

Table 2. *Readability scores, frequency of most frequent words (K1 words), and academic word level (AWL) of Four Corners 4*

Text	Readability score	Frequency of K1 words	Frequency of AWL
1	58.3	80.00	3.05
2	77.6	76.10	8.52
3	77.5	67.18	2.32
4	76	86.57	2.47
5	63.2	74.27	1.30
6	62.8	77.04	4.07
7	68.6	82.02	3.00
8	76.7	86.37	0.92
9	81.2	84.32	0.26
10	81.7	83.83	0.99
11	59.2	75.00	2.38
12	74	84.35	2.72

As depicted in Table 2, text 10 was the easiest one (readability score = 81.7) and text 1 was the most difficult one (readability score = 58.3). Also, the highest K1 (frequency of most frequent words) was 86.57 for text 4 and the highest AWL (academic word level) was 8.52 for text 2.

Correlation between Readability and K1 Words as well as Readability and AWL

To investigate the relationship between readability and K1 words and readability and academic word level in Four Corners book series, Pearson Product-Moment Correlation tests were run on the data. The results are tabulated as follows.

Table 3. *Correlation between readability and K1 words in Four Corners 3*

Correlations			
		Readability	K1words
Readability	Pearson Correlation	1	.389
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.212
	N	12	12
K1words	Pearson Correlation	.389	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.212	
	N	12	12

As shown in Table 3, the correlation coefficient was 0.389, and the P value was 0.212. As the P value was higher than 0.05, there was no significant correlation between readability and K1 words of reading texts in Four Corners 3.

Table 4. *Correlation between readability and AWL in Four corners 3*

Correlations			
		Readability	academic word level
Readability	Pearson Correlation	1	.441
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.152
	N	12	12
academic word level	Pearson Correlation	.441	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.152	
	N	12	12

As indicated in Table 4, the correlation coefficient was 0.441, and the P value was 0.152. As the P value was greater than 0.05, no significant correlation was observed between readability and AWL of reading texts in Four Corners 3.

Table 5. *Correlation between readability and K1 words in Four Corners 4*

Correlations			
		Readability	K1words
Readability	Pearson Correlation	1	.328
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.298
	N	12	12
K1words	Pearson Correlation	.328	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.298	
	N	12	12

As it was demonstrated in Table 5, the correlation coefficient was 0.328, and the P value was 0.298. As the P value was higher than 0.05, there was no significant correlation between readability and K1 words of reading texts in Four Corners 4.

Table 6. *Correlation between readability and AWL in Four corners 4*

		Correlations	
		Readability	Academic word level
Readability	Pearson Correlation	1	-.100
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.758
	N	12	12
academic word level	Pearson Correlation	-.100	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.758	
	N	12	12

Table 6 displayed that the correlation coefficient was -0.100, and the P value was 0.758. As the P value was greater than 0.05, no significant correlation was observed between readability and AWL of reading texts in Four Corners 4.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed at exploring the relationship between readability and K1 words as well as the relationship between readability and academic word level (AWL). Indeed, it intended to probe whether the difficulty of reading passages depended upon the number of the most frequent words and academic words. The findings of this study indicated that there was not any significant relationship between readability and vocabulary profile (most frequent words and academic words) of the Four Corners; in other words, the difficulty of the reading passages is not related to these two types of vocabulary. Nation (1990) and Nurweni and Read (1999) claimed that lexical knowledge is a critical necessity to comprehend texts. The difficulties of lexical items appear to be the most difficult barrier to reading technical texts in the content areas. In addition, Cobb and Horst (2001) argue that lexical knowledge is the key component to comprehend the content in specific texts in both L1 and L2. Furthermore, Haynes and Baker (1993) claimed that the most important disadvantage for L2 readers is not the lack of reading comprehension practice, but the inadequate comprehension of English vocabulary. The results of Mirshojaee and Shragard's (2015) study suggested that the higher the number of K1 words, the easier the reading passages will be. On the other hand, the lower the number of academic words, the easier the texts will be. Likewise, Chall (1958), Grabe and Stoller (2002) and Carkin (2005) agreed on the significance of vocabulary in reading comprehension ability of language learners.

Although the above-mentioned scholars agree on the difficulty of lexical knowledge as a barrier to comprehension, the findings of this study contradicted these claims. Difficulties in these reading passages are not the result of the number of frequent words or academic vocabulary. Thus, other factors might contribute in the degree of readability of reading passages. In addition to word factors, length of sentences, number of new words a passage contains, grammatical or syntactic complexity of the language used were the factors recommended by Schulz (1981), Bernhardt (1984), Lunzer and Gardner (1979), and Richards et al. (1992). Learners' interest and attitudes towards texts are the other factors that scholars such as Schraw, Bruning and Svoboda (1995) and Hidi (2001) referred to. Interestingly, density of concepts, page format, and intricacy of punctuation are what Lee (2009) pointed out to as contributing factors to comprehension of texts.

Scholars have not had agreement on the kind of factors that are influential in reading comprehension; hence, in addition to above factors, according to Stephens (2000), five style factors are likely to affect the readability of a text: they are the number of pronouns, average

number of words in sentences, percentage of different words and number of prepositional phrases. It is worth noticing that pronouns and prepositions can be considered as the first 1000 most frequent words. Likewise, Essem Educational Limited (2007) has indicated a number of factors that influence the readability of a text. These include physical factors (such as typeface, font size, spacing and layout), reader factors (such as prior knowledge, reading ability, and motivation of the reader), text structure, text coherence and cohesion, and syntax.

Concerning the results of this study, it can be concluded that although reading comprehension is the process of making meaning from a text, a process of decoding via the producing an extensive repertoire of sight words, learning the meaning of the words of the text, and learning how to recognize the abstract meaning from the text; many other factors are involved in comprehension of a text in addition to vocabulary knowledge. Thus, language teachers and learners should take this point into account that sentence length, syntactic complexity, as well as reader factors including background knowledge and culture. Among these factors, sentence length and syntactic complexity should be paid attention more by the teachers; while background knowledge must be put emphasis on by the learners. Given sentence length and syntactic complexity, teachers can play an important role in breaking long sentences into shorter ones so as to make them more comprehensible. Further, they can paraphrase the syntactically complex sentences so that their comprehension becomes less complicated for the learners.

The obtained results are probably very valuable for teachers and professors who teach English at institutions since according to the readability of the text as well as the ability of the learners to understand, they can decide for which text more time should be spent and for which text less time. Given that, readability level is also one of the factors that must be considered in the selection of educational books. Thus, institutions can choose books which are appropriate to the level of vocabulary knowledge of their students. Moreover, the results of academic word list and K1 words enable test developers to design more appropriate English tests based on the amount of vocabulary knowledge of students who are supposed to take the exam.

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